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September 2008

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TOMB RAIDER: UNDERWORLD

Survival of the fittest



Blood and Gore
Intense Violence

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ARE PASSED DOWN
THROUGH THE GENERATIONS.

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IN OUR STORYBOOKS.

THEY ARE
THE STONE
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THEY ARE
OUR FEARS
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Choices

E3 and pre-E3 and Comic-Con and traveling for stories has left me with an ongoing July headache. And all the gallons of caffeine ingested to keep me somewhat coherent has apparently destroyed my insides and replaced them with liquid nausea. Moments like these, it's better not to think about too much, so I'm going to completely remove my editor hat and talk about something that has been on my mind purely as a gamer, free of professional perspective and informed opinion.

Sony and the PS3 don't get a lot of love in many circles, and the tone coming out of E3 continues to be dreary. In some ways, people need to latch onto a victor, they need the drama of competition, so it's no wonder at a show like this someone is going to get picked on more than they deserve.

Okay, there I go, slowly putting that hat back on. Let's pull back: I just want to offer a perspective from a guy who gets home after a long day and loves to play games with his friends or spend a few hours escaping to other worlds on my own. Most of that time is spent with the PS3. It doesn't matter to me in that moment if Sony is messing things up with their untamed beast of a system (and they are truly messing things up), it matters that I am perfectly happy with my PS3 and I love the experiences I'm having with it. All my friends own PS3s, most of them own only PS3s. When we are deep into our experiences, we don't seem to worry too much about the future of Sony or how much worse their press conferences are than everyone else's painful press conferences. We worry more about

the next time we will fire up the PS3 and watch a movie or have a great time with Pixel Junk games or whatever else. Add to that "whatever else" the PS3-exclusive Heavy Rain, my pick of the show at E3 2008, and Little Big Planet while you're at it.

I have plenty of fine reasons exactly why I believe in the PS3—simple enough, the controller is perfect for my hands—but before I get in too much trouble here, let's pause and give praise to the Xbox 360 and Fable 2 and Gears of War 2 for being must-have-nows.

And how about that showing at E3 for the Wii? Can't say I'm willing to pause and give praise to Nintendo for that one.

You know what, it's okay to have a system that dominates your gaming life, to have a ... gasp ... favorite. We all gravitate toward things we like, and sometimes thinking less about why and simply enjoying the experience is the best path. It's telling to see where the critical line is being drawn, what with all the casual versus hardcore, simpler games meeting up with increasingly complex games, narrative-driven games straining against traditional fun, multiple systems with multiple points of functionality all trying to be the favorite. Oy.

Favorites are more niche than ever, niches are more fun than ever. Some people hate Tomb Raider and will pass right over our cover story on a game that is shaping up to be one of the year's best, and that's okay too, because next month, you'll get your fill with a look at an 8-bit splatterhouse of a classic, and a big, fat, gun-slinging first-

"Sony and the PS3 don't get a lot of love in many circles, and the tone coming out of E3 continues to be dreary.."

person multiplayer extravaganza back from the dead.

But talking favorites, Tomb Raider has always been a personal one; the first game in the series is one of the rare greats that showed us something new. When I play your favorites, which I enjoy in different ways, I'm secretly wishing those games had more adventure, more exotic spaces that stare back like a mountain daring a rock climber to climb. I wish those games had more of the spirit of Tomb Raider in them. But then again, that would be pretty boring if my niche was the only niche.

Brady Fiechter

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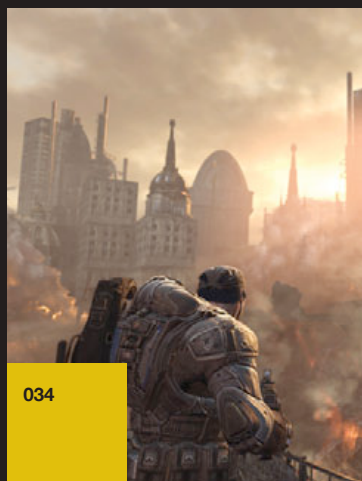
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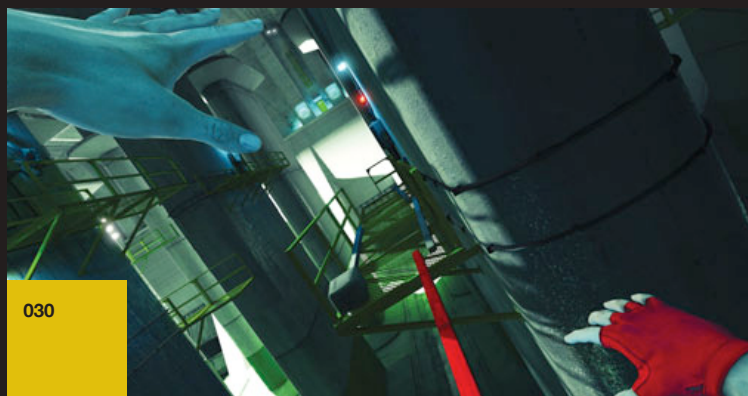
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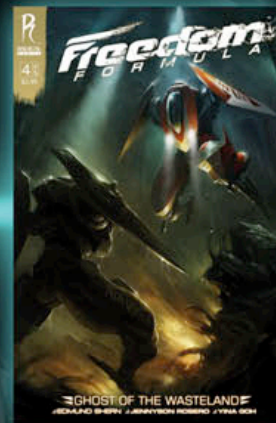
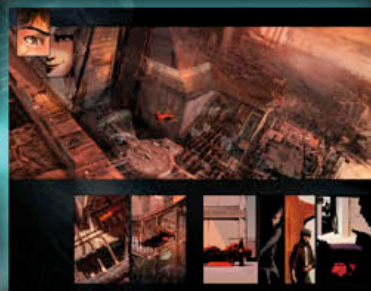
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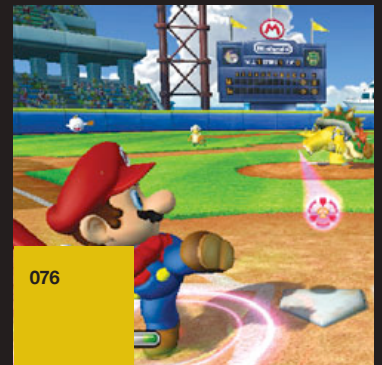


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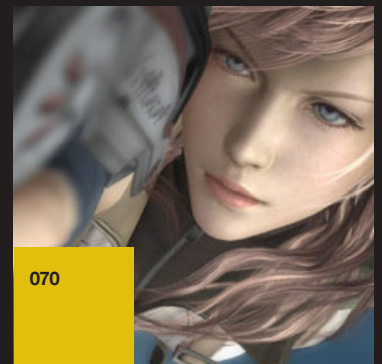


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SEPTEMBER 2008

Top 5 360 titles year-to-date through June08

1	GRAND THEFT AUTO IV	Apr-08	TAKE 2 INTERACTIVE (CORP)	2,788,000
2	CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE	Nov-07	ACTIVISION (CORP)	923,000
3	TOM CLANCY'S RAINBOW SIX: VEGAS 2	Mar-08	UBISOFT	865,000
4	ARMY OF TWO	Mar-08	ELECTRONIC ARTS	707,000
5	ROCK BAND SPECIAL ED BUNDLE	Nov-07	MTV GAMES/ELECTRONIC ARTS	625,000

Top 5 PS3 titles year-to-date through June08

1	GRAND THEFT AUTO IV	Apr-08	TAKE 2 INTERACTIVE (CORP)	1,495,000
2	METAL GEAR SOLID 4	Jun-08	KONAMI DIGITAL ENT.	775,000
3	CALL OF DUTY 4: MODERN WARFARE	Nov-07	ACTIVISION (CORP)	510,000
4	MLB '08: THE SHOW	Mar-08	SONY (CORP)	334,000
5	GRAN TURISMO 5: PROLOGUE	Apr-08	SONY (CORP)	329,000

Top 5 Wii titles year-to-date through June08

1	SUPER SMASH BROS: BRAWL	Mar-08	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	3,413,000
2	MARIO KART W/ WHEEL	Apr-08	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	2,229,000
3	PLAY W/ REMOTE	Feb-07	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	2,011,000
4	GUITAR HERO III: LEGENDS OF ROCK W/ WIRELESS GUITAR	Oct-07	ACTIVISION (CORP)	1,134,000
5	FIT W/ BALANCE BOARD	May-08	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	1,060,000

Top 5 SKUs for the platforms do not include collectors/special editions

1	MARIO BROTHERS	9,219,000
2	GRAND THEFT AUTO	5,765,000
3	GUITAR HERO	4,396,000
4	CALL OF DUTY	2,418,000
5	LEGO	2,375,000

Top 10 SKU's June 2008

1	PS3 METAL GEAR SOLID 4	Jun-08	KONAMI	774.6K
2	NDS GUITAR HERO ON TOUR	Jun-08	ACTIVISION	422.3K
3	360 NINJA GAIDEN II	Jun-08	MICROSOFT	372.7K
4	WII FIT W/BALANCE BOARD	May-08	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	372.7K
5	WII PLAY W/ REMOTE	Feb-07	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	359.1K
6	360 BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY	Jun-08	ELECTRONIC ARTS	346.8K
7	WII MARIO KART W/WHEEL	Apr-08	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	322.4K
8	WII LEGO INDIANA JONES: TOA	Jun-08	LUCASARTS	294.5K
9	NDS LEGO INDIANA JONES: TOA	Jun-08	LUCASARTS	267.8K
10	PS2 LEGO INDIANA JONES: TOA	Jun-08	LUCASARTS	260.3K



Have you hugged a number today?

Metal Gear 4 not just a great game, but a **million-plus** seller on day one, producers happy, **3 million** units shipped worldwide, **25 million** units worldwide for the entire Metal Gear Solid series...

54 developers in Japan join with Nintendo in a lawsuit going after "majicon" devices, such as the R4, that allow unlicensed software (including pirated games) to be run on the DS...

California government continues to bleed money, this time in the form of a **\$282,794** payoff to the Entertainment Software Association as a result of legal fees accrued defending removal of a videogame law restricting sales to minors...

Xbox 360 Arcade now **\$279** (**\$199.99** is being rumored)/ **60 GB Pro \$349.99** / **120 GB Elite \$449.99**.

60 GB PS3 was **\$399** / **80 GB** is now **\$399** / **60 GB** is long discontinued...

Soul Calibur IV sells **2 million** copies in the first week

Number of polygons in the new Lara model, **30,000**, number in Legend, **12,000**...

240 million - amount of downloadable content purchases from the Xbox Live Marketplace since launch...

48 - number of trophies added to Uncharted: Drake's Fortune, the first retail PS3 game to support the new trophy system...

Guitar Hero Aerosmith, according to Rolling Stone, sold **567,000** copies the first week; the band's last album, *Honkin' On Bobo*, sold **160,500** the first week...



HOW TO PLAY GOLDENEYE: ROGUE AGENT

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Avatars For Everyone, But Not Every Game

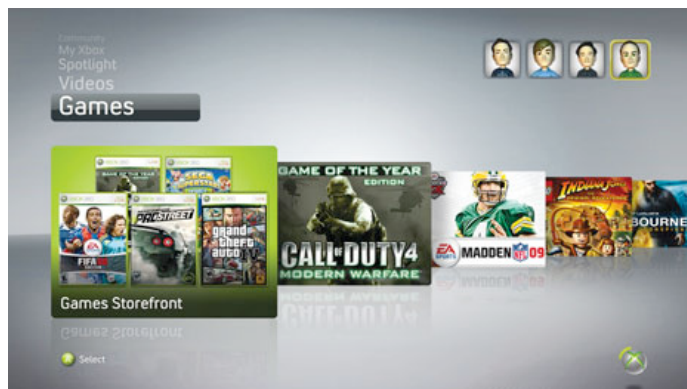
MS wants you to create... nicely



When the Avatars that the folks at Rare have whipped up for Microsoft's upcoming Xbox 360 dashboard overhaul make their debut this year, you'll no doubt find them cropping up in a vast array of places across the Xbox 360 experience. Where you won't find them, however, is in situations where they can kill, be killed, have sex, or do anything else too taboo.

Speaking at Microsoft's recent Gamefest event, Xbox Live GM Eric Kilgore made note of one rule currently in place for games that want to make use of Avatars: they must have an ESRB rating of E10+ or lower. So, nothing too naughty for your new digital self, at least for now; Kilgore also mentioned that while that restriction will be in place for the launch of Avatars, it could always change in the future.

As well, Kilgore also revealed that Microsoft has worked hard to allow Avatars to be integrated in a number of exciting ways, and not just when it comes to games; much like the current Gamercard, Xbox Live members will be able to show off their Avatars on websites, message forums, and more.



If you build it... well, we'll see

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We hear that making videogames is actually kind of a tough job—at least when millions of dollars is on the line and dozens of employees are all toiling endless hours to get a game in your hands and make you happy with the results. If you want try things on a much smaller but no-less-important scale, Microsoft this fall will kick off its Xbox Live Community Games, allowing you to create a game and get into the hands of other players through Xbox Live Marketplace. And possibly even make some money from the deal, as Microsoft is planning on some sort of royalty structure. XNA Creators Club members who create their project in XNA Game Studio can submit for peer review at <http://creators.xna.com>. After approval through a few sources, a price is set from 200 to 800 points. Microsoft is hinting at some possible support for the more successful titles.



PLAYSTATION 3



Dear Editor:

Having finally grown tired of my LOUD, detachable, frozen piece of Xbox 360 electronic junk – a system I once praised, only in delusion it seems, trying so hard to see in the son what was in the father, that badass of 2001 through 2005 – I spent my Economic Stimulus Check on a sleek, sexy PS3 planning to play some Folklore before swallowing my dislike for sequels, renewing my love for Moogles, and purchasing the exclusive Final Fantasy XIII (it's not really a sequel) in December. Only, I now find FF XIII isn't exclusive anymore. While I can understand Squaresoft leaving behind the inferior, cartridge-based N64 for the CD-ROM Playstation of the previous decade, I only see dishonor in Square Enix whoring itself out to the system the American nation has, in error, embraced. Square Enix might just be the company that finally kills the PS3 in the States. It used to be, people would buy a system because of a game. The problem, however, isn't the ethical failings of one Square Enix. It was not the first company to abandon the idea of an exclusive. At the same time, other companies have not even considered exclusives. And so I ask: Where have all the exclusives gone? And to get metaphysical about it: What then is the point of buying any system if I can get the same games on all systems? Whether you have an Xbox 360 or PS3, you will still be able to play Final Fantasy XIII, Mirror's Edge, Dead Space, X-Blades, Golden Axe: Beast Rider, Wet, Tomb Raider Underworld, Resident Evil 5 (if for some reason you would want to), and any number of games already released and to be released that have not been created exclusively for a system by some developer and some publisher actually bothering to take the time to hone a game to a particular set of hardware and controller. So, in frustration, I look to Nintendo, but that Wiimote nunchaku thing is and always has been absolutely silly, and I get no further. Instead, I've found myself buying older, but new, games for 6th Generation systems. As I write this, Shadow of the

Colossus has arrived from Amazon. It cost me \$18.99. I guess there's a reason why I own a Gamecube, Xbox, and PS2, and a reason why I'm still playing each one years into the current generation. Anyway, the exclusive Valkyria Chronicles looks promising for PS3 owners, and at least we can be sure the beautiful Folklore will not be coming to the Xbox 360 ever.

Sincerely,

Stephen Oravec

If I (among many others) am truly your boss as one letter writer from your August issue wrote I just wanted to say keep up the good work! I am ecstatic that you stopped giving ratings to your reviews. I always read the magazine cover to cover, but numbers don't always match up with the words regardless of the magazine. Additionally, numbers don't hold up over time. As the many retro collections available for PSP have taught me, a perfect 10 game from way back when is definitely not always a perfect 10 now. Keep on keepin' on!

Rob Swan

Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

...I find you guys to be unpretentious, enthusiastic, and articulate. That being said, I don't understand the "no rating reviews" decision. Here's why... I often look for reviews of games I'm interested in and read them. But from time to time I'll see an exceptional score from I game I have never heard of, this leads me to read the review and many times start following the game and eventually buying and supporting it. I'm not going to read lengthy reviews for products I'm not familiar with. Just something to think about.

Rgs,
Marc Brown

[This is the last letter we print for/ against scores. Promise.]

The Ops files

Human error crept up and took us by surprise last month to the tune of placeholder info. bar on our Sacred 2 preview. The correct data is: Sacred 2: Fallen Angel, Developer: Ascaron Entertainment, Publisher: CDV Software Entertainment USA, Systems: Xbox 360, PS3, PC, Available: November 2008. Our apologies to Ascaron, and CDV. ...And BOB Kane.



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(((Developer Sound Off)))

Clearly, No One Literate Wrote This Column

words Brandon Justice

So the thing about modern game development is that, if you're not unbearably deliberate about the whole affair, it can quickly degenerate into a sad sort of compulsory cultural cluelessness, where you miss a lot of things that go on out there in the "real world." You lose touch with friends, you forget what a Saturday feels like, and you get, like, seven episodes behind on your *Battlestar Galactica*. What's worse, when you hit what the industry affectionately refers to as "crunch time," you completely lose touch with the "it" topics of the afternoon.

But when I saw that shit about Resident Evil 5, I just had to crawl out of my particleboard palace of productivity and laugh my ass off for a minute. For those of you who might have missed it, the gist of this political firestorm is that, despite the fact that it's cool to generate about 13 percent of the industry's revenue by repeatedly taking a bullet-by-bullet tour of Europe in some tired World War Whatever FPS extravaganza, the moment someone starts shooting zombies of African descent, we've *clearly* crossed the line.

All I can say is, "ARE YOU F***ING KIDDING ME?"

I know our medium is elbow-deep in the uncanny valley of passable cinematography at the moment, but come on, people, have some sense.

Seriously.

I watch the Resident Evil 5 trailer, and I'm not thinking about whether or not the setting is culturally sensitive. I'm not crafting a letter to Mega Man about his co-workers' lack of discretion. I'm thinking about what it's like in the Third World. What it means to be isolated. Alone. Alien.

I'm looking at the level of visual detail and I'm absolutely floored by the thought of where we'll be in five years. I'm thinking about how it's an interesting departure from the classic overcast RE experience, and how the contrast will allow this game to explore some interesting emotional responses from the player and it's going to be f***ing cool.

Not to be unbearably insensitive, people, but is it too much to ask that we as an industry are allowed to get out of our directorial diapers before the internet lets loose with the dime-store politicking and hapless accusations

"Games are already facing an uphill battle toward some semblance of maturity in the subject-matter department."

of Klan rallies at Capcom HQ?

I mean *really*.

Games are already facing an uphill battle toward some semblance of maturity in the subject-matter department. Gamers don't even know *how* to demand more, and publishers aren't about to take a risk to give them something they may or may not want, but when you really stop and think about it, we're a medium that's capable of

so much more. Other arms of the entertainment industry explore complex social, political, and sexual themes all the time, but we can't even set a game in Africa? Wow, indeed.

We could flex our editorial muscle investigating the abhorrent hours imposed by the average studio, or talk about the near-complete lack of employee profit sharing in an industry that routinely boasts about making "more money than Hollywood," but what do we do? We pick a fight with folks who aren't tainted by our sense of guilt, entitlement, and conditional sensitivity. That sounds about right.

The worst part? Recent video clips have shown an apparent gangrenous desegregation of the indigenous undead population. Way to go, folks. With a painfully trite collection of e-mails and editorials, you've officially censored the creative vision on an industry. That's right...you. You're fighting the good fight. Righting *obvious* wrongs. Improving the digital landscape for impressionable young minds. Now if you could just find a way to get zone defenses in NCAA 2009 to cover the sidelines, you'd be my heroes.

Kidding. About the righting wrongs bit.

I'm all for people calling out the bad guys, and clearly, I'm for freedom of speech, but at some point we have to start being more responsible. Furthermore, we have to grow up. We have to realize that it is an absolute *struggle* to get even an ounce of creative freedom in this infantile industry. We have to know that it's okay to push the envelope, and moreover, that it's unnecessary to label what is clearly a pile of dirt made by a small rodent with bad eyesight some sort of monolith to racial oppression. I'm sure some folks meant well. I'm sure some were genuinely upset. But in all honesty, I just don't think it's justified, and I sure as hell don't think it's beneficial.

I'm not saying game developers are entirely innocent. There's an unspeakable amount of graphic violence in gaming and kids of all ages spend way too much time feeding addictive tendencies through our work, but there's no smoking gun here. No evil plot. No bad guys. Just bad lip-synching technology and a desire to do something visually distinct in a series that could use a change of pace.

I, for one, wish we'd sit down, shut up, and see where the ride takes us before we start declaring shenanigans. The result might just surprise us, or at the very least, lead us somewhere new.

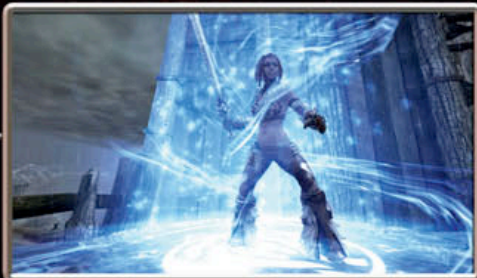
Ironically, Brandon Justice rarely shuts up as design director for Play Hard Sports. Feel free to explain the whole conspiracy to bjustice@playhard.net.



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TOMB RAIDER: UNDERWORLD

Lara ventures into the shadows of the unknown...

words Brady Fletcher







f Thailand is not one of the most beautiful places on earth, there is little arguing that it is the most exotic. And there is no arguing at all that it is the most exotic, most beautiful place you've been to in a Tomb Raider adventure.

This is the Thailand of Lara Croft's eternal fantasies—undiscovered, deadly, ancient. The indomitable tomb raider will explore the unbounded waters of the Mediterranean, climb the Mayan ruins in Mexico, and on this particular stretch of her journey around the world, she is somewhere off the coast of Thailand, about to face off with Shiva, the god of destruction. Shiva's consort, Kali, is here, too, guarding the entrance to something...*big*. These massive statues, carved with exquisite detail and looming elegance, are, of course, linked to a long series of mechanisms that must be manipulated from strategic spots throughout the richly organic maze of stone and water and growth. Who knows when the last human touched this area; it genuinely feels mysterious and unsettling, and the invitation to walk its path is genuinely stirring.

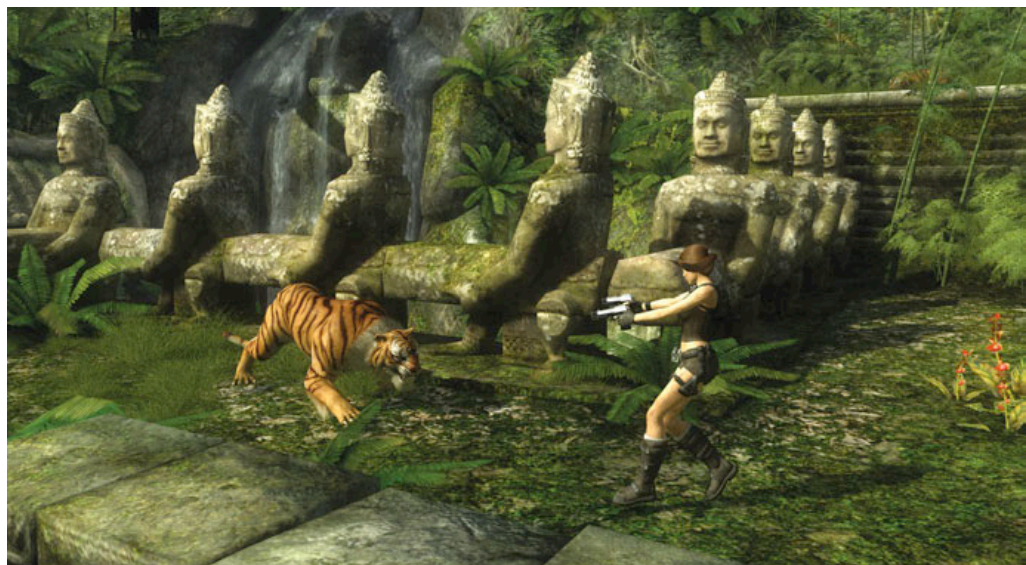
Tomb Raider: Underworld is not an overhaul of Lara's mechanics as much as it is an extension of those mechanics into a higher level of world sophistication and authenticity. Crystal Dynamics introduced a new control scheme in Tomb Raider: Legend, refined it in Anniversary, and now are focusing on making Lara and her situations ring as true as possible, coining the philosophy, "What Could Lara Do?" The idea is to frame Lara in a certain amount of believability, whether interacting with items, exploring the land, or dealing with the emotional weight of the narrative. This translates in more subtle ways than you might first think; for example, cast your grappling line and leave it attached as you move around a corner, and the line

will flex to follow your path; a capable gymnast such as Lara should be able to fire off rounds if she's secure on a rope or ledge, and so she can. Sounds simple, but these little details add up—little details that often break down and reveal the typically rigid nature of our game worlds.

This is the first from-the-ground-up, next-gen Tomb Raider, and while the bump up in level detail is dramatic, it's the motion capture on Lara that is equally impactful on selling the fantasy of the character. Underworld is still being consistently tweaked, but even now my run through Thailand demonstrates a fuller connection to Lara than you're

used to in the series. Sure, she can shoot two targets at once now, and she has more flexibility of movement, but it's the broader components in Tomb Raider: Underworld that seem to matter most.

The overwhelming sense of wonder is immediate, and that's what Tomb Raider is ultimately about. As creative director Eric Lindstrom points out, it's not their goal to reinvent the wheel, but more to make sure that wheel hums with a spirit and mystery that move the player. "We're talking about making people believe that if you went deep enough into the Thailand coast where no one's been before, you might find something extraordinary."



Toby Gard Cinematics Director
Eric Lindstrom Creative Director

INTERVIEW

play: When it came time to officially go forward with making Tomb Raider: Underworld, what was the first thing that absolutely had to be addressed?

Eric Lindstrom: Well, there's kind of two questions there, one of them has to do with what exactly we were going to do with the game. The other was what we were going to do with the adventure. We had a lot of thoughts in terms of enhancing the gameplay. But Toby and I started a set of conversations in cafes in San Francisco and whatnot, talking about what her next adventure would be. The mythology was big to us.

Toby Gard: Yeah, just a lot of brain-storming sessions, trying to work out how to take things further and what we're going to do...There really are two parts here: wherever the emotional journey is, and then there's what the artifacts, what the mythology was going to be, right? That had pretty much been decided by Eric, where around the world the game was going to go based on the mythology being created. Our job was to take what story was already there and make it as brief but interesting as possible. And that's really hard because of so many restraints around trying to stay true to the mythology that already exists and the actual needs of the actual game adventure. That's why it took us absolutely ages [laughs].

Tomb Raider really does have quite the opportunity to take the idea of "world-based" gaming into compelling territory. Do you have some foundational component to ground the adventure?

EL: I don't think we really had a single starting point, other than the philosophical goals.

When you talk about the philosophical goals...

TG: We could make a Tomb Raider game where Lara doesn't go to these seven different places around the world, maybe she really dives deep inside the ruins of Egypt and finds all kinds of interesting things down there. But for us, one of the stakes was that we wanted a world-spanning, multi-ruin, multi-underworld adventure, and that informed all the other discussions after that.

When you look at the first Tomb Raider you created at Crystal, Tomb Raider Legend, and then the follow-up with Anniversary, those games took a few fairly different approaches to the design. Anniversary was obviously a remake of the original, more exploration-heavy. Where does that leave Underworld in the balance of action and adventure?

EL: We're really building on both. We didn't need to compromise between the two, because we really felt there was no need to compromise. Legend was very much action-adventure forward, and the player-driven aspects of Tomb Raider 1 aren't in conflict with that. If you accept that there are many things you can do to pace an adventure, there are combat moments, puzzle reveals, discoveries, there's peril. All those can affect the pace, make it feel very dynamic and forward-moving, even while people are exploring those spaces on their own. We felt by having a strong narrative backbone that logically pulled the player and Lara from the beginning through the middle to the end, the player could have all of these exploration areas where they drove what the action was, according to what they wanted to explore first, what they were interested in.

How much does the environment—Tomb Raider is so much about environmental expression—how much does the space you're in tell that story?

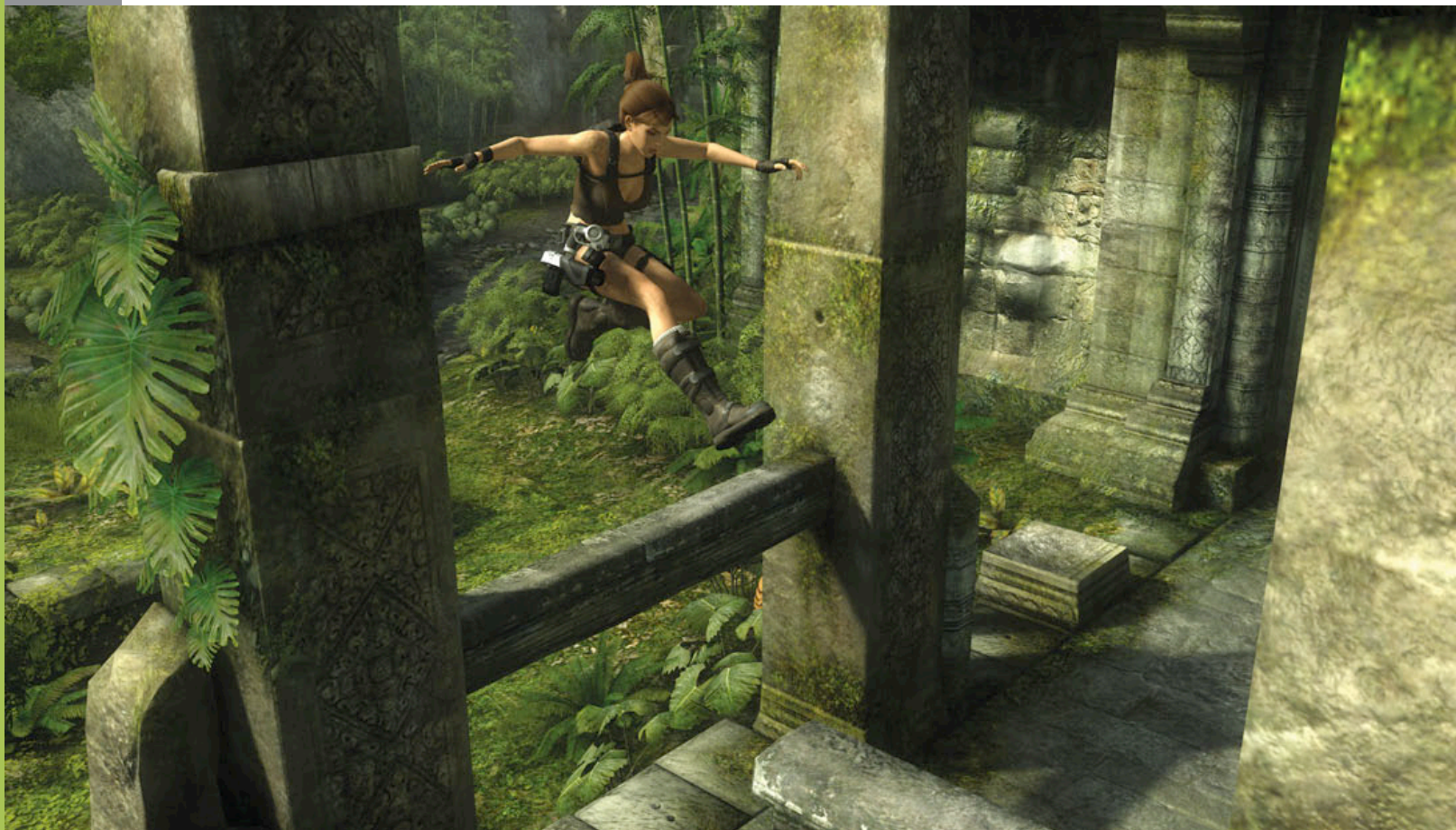
EL: Yeah, story can mean a lot of things. When you're in Thailand, you're experiencing the story of Thailand, even when you aren't in a cut-scene. That was really important to us. The backbone is the logic. Your world isn't fully open because you have a door that is locked and you need to figure out how to unlock it. As soon as you do, you go through it and now you are on the other side and you have more to explore. There is a chain of logic that isn't restrictive to the player; it's the way you would expect the world to work. And that's really what we're talking about when it comes to driving the player forward to the end of the experience.

You guys have motion-captured Lara for the first time, dramatically overhauling her animation routines. Does this choice alter the control scheme or gameplay ideas in any way?

TG: The biggest win has been the motion capturing in the cut-scenes. We've been able to make Lara so much more real than she's ever been before. That has definitely increased the impact of the story and the believability of the character.

Yeah, I will say, seeing Lara moving like this does have a greater impact than I thought it would.

EL: There is a realism to it, but...This kind of detail, it's an order of magnitude more than fidelity, whether it's realistic or not. She does things that are more than realistic.



Lara is obviously still grounded in a good deal of reality, right? She's someone impressive but...

EL: Yeah, very strong, very fit, fearless.

TG: And that's the key thing really, if you don't believe in the character, then you've got nothing pulling you through the world. She has to be believable.

When you extend this iconic character to the combat scenarios, was there ever thought to get more extreme with the way Lara deals with the action? Perhaps make her more of that videogame character who is less bound by the rules of restraint?

EL: It's easier for production realities to make that decision for you than anything else. I think people want to be able to do more, but they don't necessarily want to control the characters more. They want to do more in the world, but no, they don't want to memorize button maps and combinations and whatnot. That's part of the mainstreaming of game design, it's for people to have a more intuitive yet broader impact on the world without a lot of complications.

It's what Lara explores that counts. It's not the character, the sex appeal or whatever she gets called on. I honestly don't care for Lara—put anyone in there—I care for exploring these spaces.

EL: So much of the team is involved on the levels themselves on such a granular, closed space, it would be difficult for them to think about it as anything else. It's very easy for them to think of it as a tomb-raiding game because that's the focus on all the development. The people working on the model of Lara, how she interacts with the space, are separate team members. It's easy for us to concentrate on what makes Lara who she is, because we understand it in a way that is different from the way people playing the game perceive it. Words that most express her are strength and fearlessness. Sex appeal is just one of these other elements.

TG: Yeah, by playing up her sex appeal it pretty much ruins the character. She's supposed to be seen as a person who does things, not just acting as eye candy. That differentiating is mainly the reason so many female game characters fail because when people only look at them skin deep, they can't even think past those flimsy, ridiculous costumes. But having said that, one



of Eric's key goals for this project was for it to be about the environment, be about the tombs. That's been a big focus for this team from day one. Which it sounds like is exactly what you're hoping for.

When you were creating Lara and the game around her for the first time back on PlayStation, do you think your mind-set was any different then?

TG: To be honest with you, when I was first developing the project, I wasn't expecting that people would be

thinking they were Lara Croft. That was part and parcel of the third-person change. At the time, everybody was doing first-person corridor-style games, and the Tomb Raider concept in essence was basically that, but in third person. And so my expectation was that the psychological attachment would be one of controlling rather than being. That informed a lot of the decisions in how she was made, how she acted, particularly her personality strengths married with the physical vulnerabilities.

You mention first-person shooters. Just what kind of influences were you seeing there with Tomb Raider?

TG: To be honest with you, the real blueprint probably was Ultima Underworld. It wasn't a first-person shooter, it was the concept of puzzle-based, internal 3-D spaces. And then making that as cinematic as possible, and bringing it into modern times.

Whenever you approach the character today, aesthetically, you have so much more opportunity to detail the character. Do you have to be careful you don't ruin Lara with all this available tech and turn her into an uncanny valley case?

TG: It matters, actually, yeah. The biggest change for Lara's character came when we were trying to get Legend going, she'd been in Core's hands the whole time before that. We needed to find a way to make her look next-gen but not go down that uncanny valley. People here were trying to make her proportionally more realistic while keeping the cartoony touches on her. When I arrived, we decided to create a pretty stylized proportion on her body and face, but then put all the detail in—you can zoom in and see pores. That seems to create a situation that is believable but isn't weird. I think particularly with the Underworld model, that's been really successful.





Must be a little unnerving finally deciding you've nailed it.

TG: [Laughs.] Yeah, yeah, it goes on and on, those constant revisions.

Coming in on TR Legend, I'm wondering what your priorities were. The series was in a rut, people were understandably skeptical with going forward, you had to tackle quite a few issues. Is there any sort of added comfort or freedom now that you've gotten past that Legend phase and perhaps found your stride? Any shackles gone?

EL: I don't know...[laughs]. Do you feel any shackles gone?

TG: [Laughs.]

EL: Every game is, do the best game you possibly can make, and that's enough pressure right there. Whether it's Legend...If anything, we benefit from the fact that we have an engine to start from that made a Tomb Raider game, and that gave us a leg up. We started to invent a lot of things that we could start stacking on top of what we already had learned. But you still reach as far as you can, that takes all the effort you have.

The heart of Tomb Raider, there are some things that cannot change.

TG: I guess you tend to ask different people even in this company that question and you get different answers. But for me, the key is exploration, right? That is basically the word that describes what a Lara Croft game is all about. Remove that and you have nothing left. But helping to prop up that main goal, you obviously have Lara's intensely uncompromising character, it's absolutely needed.

EL: I would attach to exploration the idea of discovery. And that discovery leading to solving ancient mysteries, and the character of those mysteries can vary, but she's always seeking an underlying truth that

is currently unknown in the world.

Tomb Raider, in some ways, has been about isolation in the depths of these unknown worlds. You took Lara to the city in Legend...

EL: A lot of what we wanted to do was explore a variety of experiences that were very much at the core of her experience. If she were to go to a city space and not explore, not discover, not solve, then we're not tomb-raiding. It is certainly possible for you to go into a space and explore, discover, and a lot of people responded very well to Tokyo being part of the Legend experience because climbing up outside the building with all these signs and stuff was pretty much her mechanic set in a way that was very different, it felt experientially very unique. Wouldn't want to spend the whole game there, because it gets too far away from her archaeological thrust, but at the same time, by sticking to the right core elements of her experience, you can reach out in different ways to vary that experience.

I loved King Arthur's Tomb; in the opening of the library, you really switched up the perspective and turned on a claustrophobic feel.

EL: What's interesting in the example you give, this idea that in that particular level, Arthur's grave, you actually spent a relatively little amount of time in the above-ground area, which was the modern section, then you broke through a couple levels and you got deeper into older spaces until you got to a really old space below. And that's the heart of the experience, peeling back layers. This idea of peeling back these layers was something Toby was really adamant about.

With that passage from something more familiar to something completely made up...how would you describe Underworld in terms of its reliance on the purely fantastical?

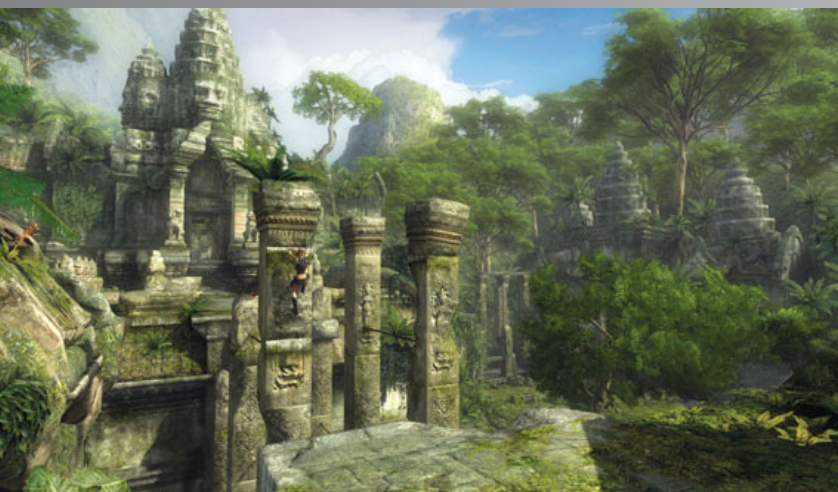
"They want to do more in the world, but they don't want to memorize button maps and combinations and whatnot."

TG: Well, probably the word "realism" for us would be better expressed as believability. Believability is what we're really aiming for, but at the same time, when people get thrilled about going into a ghost house, what they're thrilled about is the possibility of seeing a ghost. That fear-slash-excitement of the unknown, the only way for us to deliver on that unknown is if something fantastic does eventually happen. So with Lara, she has to discover the truths as Eric has said, behind the myths, and those have to be pretty amazing and cool. So fantasy to some extent is always important. But having said that, we are constantly trying to avoid falling through the real world into some sort of weird Harry Potter land where all sorts of madness is going on, and as we try to restrain ourselves and keep it down to a sort of...The difference is the delta between our world and the world of this game that gives us that weirdness.

You talk about the ghost house. Games like to dump in an army of ghosts, then the experience is broken. It happens all the time. Do you think about that much?

EL: Absolutely. All these ingredients make the experience. Some of those are active, exciting moments, some of them are calm, discovery moments. Having those moments where you are attacked or overwhelmed by enemies, having them there because it makes sense for the scene, and it punctuates the experience in the proper way.

Wrapping back to the question I asked before,



TR8 HEAVY JUNGLE DESIGNS

about what part of Tomb Raider is invaluable to the experience. Did you guys remove anything from the formula you decided simply needed to be tossed?
[Long pause.]

So there wasn't anything? This is the perfect game?

EL: [Laughs.] I'm sending out psychic waves of, "Toby, please answer this question..." Since you are old-school Tomb Raider, brought forth into the future, what do you think is time to go?

TG: There wasn't anything... Well, I suppose what I called out earlier as being something that got fixed, which is just how vulnerable to death she is. The amount of death in Tomb Raider 1 was obscene, to the point that we had to make it as funny as possible for people to at least somewhat enjoy the constant frustration. That frustration is a big one that pretty much had to be cut. [Laughs.]

EL: Yeah, the biggest thing we changed in Legend was that notion that...it was getting off the grid, but it was

also making jumping and grabbing and pulling up on ledges a means to an end more, less of a test of your ability with the controller. Make it more about "How am I gonna go forward?" Not "Am I gonna execute each of these jumps perfectly?" I think that the fan community took that pretty well. There were some people who didn't like how that represented a simplification of the game, it made it easier. But for the most part, people agreed it was time to go to the next step, which is: I can execute these things relatively easily, what do I do with it, where do I go with it now? We wanted to take that even further with Underworld.

You've said you don't want to get caught up in complex control schemes.

EL: The concept of what could Lara do, the concept of consistency throughout the entire game without special case exceptions. Those two things in themselves gave us the steering committee to be able to make a lot of decisions. We have a big team, a lot

of ideas come up, when somebody would come up and say, "Hey, let's have this wacky thing happen" or "Let's have this combo set appear here." Often it just wouldn't get through the filter of "What could she do?" Is this consistent with what she should be able to do everywhere else? And by really sticking to those philosophies, that really kept us from getting a lot of crazy, special-case complexities in the control schemes. It really was just sticking to our guns about not being seduced by something that might feel locally cool but [would] really just add to the chaos of what players are trying to deal with.

I wanted to talk a bit about what interactivity means in Tomb Raider. You're climbing the environment, jumping over it, through it, around it. It's architecture you're playing on. How do you respond to the idea of connecting to the environment?

EL: I'd like to hear Toby's answer after mine, because we've never really talked about this directly. I've said this before in conversations: Tomb Raider games are [some] of the hardest games to make. Because of the fidelity requirements, because she does so many different things, and needs to do them well, and she climbs on everything. And as soon as you climb, there are all sorts of rules communicating what you can and can't climb on, how you can do it. It has to look really good because you get a lot closer to it than when you're in one of these corridor shooters; there's all this stuff that looks really great because you never get close. There's all kinds of challenges on how we spend our focus and our resources, and it's really hard. One of the reasons I'm really so excited about Underworld is that I think we did I really good job of delivering all those things.

TG: I have an obsession of wanting to climb to the top of things, like a little monkey, I guess. And particularly I have fond memories of England, of the times when I was younger, before all the cultural heritage people essentially put ropes around all the ruins in England. Kids were freely climbing all over these castle ruins, you could get up to the third floor, there were fragments of crazy stuff, everybody's "weeee," having a good time and not caring about any of that. But that type of feeling, and the sense of place you get when you do go to ruins, the real impact of a sense of past that you feel when you're in a ruin, an abandoned space. That really excites me a lot. That's what Tomb Raider is trying to achieve. There's a reason why things like climbing over the giant sphinx were meaningful to me...It's really a fantasy fulfillment. And then the way the game was put together. As you say, it's not so much playing in the space, it's kind of finding a way to open up this complex puzzle box that takes you down to the core of the game world.



“...it’s kind of finding a way to open up this complex puzzle box that takes you down to the core of the game world.”

And that’s what I love about the ideas behind Tomb Raider.

TG: Yeah, and it was such a big shift, the Castle Wolfensteins and the Doms were, “Wow, there’s this 3-D space,” but it was just a floor plan. And going into Tomb Raider, it was this order-of-magnitude leap of, “Wow, I really am in a space, I feel very immersed in exploration going through this space.” In Wolfenstein, it was all about managing your cover and your firing lines, that was it. When you walked into Lost Valley in Tomb Raider 1, you really looked at it the way you did as a kid out on the hillside, always wondering how to get up on that ridge. What am I going to see when I get up there? That kind of thinking really hadn’t been tapped.

And when it comes to making your way up through those spaces, one thing that really stands out is the way you guys sell Lara clasp a ledge and working her way up. The smack, the movement—is that a minor detail I’m latching onto, or did you really sweat over this to get it the way it is?

EL: Toby, you were deep into that.

TG: Yeah, I was very deep into that, I was actually in that particular squad of people working on it. It was a very scary thing there, I was introduced to that later on in the production. There were concerns about how it was going, and I worked with the other guys to create the system that would deal with the jumps and the landings and the attachment. I was very eager to include the inertia that you talk about. It all came really late [laughs]. In Legend, there was a lot of fear, we were right at the last minute. It was just broken. She was attaching really poorly, so people could still test the levels, the gameplay was correct, but it looked terrible until our new system finally slotted in the last minute. I’m glad you thought it was successful [laughs].

EL: One of the things that makes Crystal such a strong studio, across the team, we all do believe the details really do matter. That’s one of my big points of how we push forward the whole game development—people notice stuff, and when they don’t, it matters anyway. If you take that away, they may not say anything about it, but they’ll like your game less. If you hold up two games that are the same, except this game has the details taken care of, this one doesn’t, you know which one will be successful.

The tone of the game, where does this Underworld allusion take us? And don’t just tell

me you’re “going darker!”

TG: Yeah, there’s a reason it says “Underworld.” It is definitely darker though, that’s a necessary result of...I don’t really know how to describe it, really. It’s not because we sat down and decided it had to be darker, that there was this one path we were heading down. I feel like there are a lot of games that do it in a gimmicky way. “Oh look, we have Jack and Daxter, it’s really good, but what if he was [in ominous tone] darker?” Same thing with Prince of Persia, it’s a bit rubbishy because it clearly doesn’t to appeal to the teenager, angst-ridden guy, that’s really not in any way the direction we came at. This tale just ended up being...I guess more believable and contextualized.

EL: Yeah, I’ve been struggling to find a word from the beginning instead of the word “dark,” because when people hear the word “dark” in marketing, they bring a lot of different associations and baggage. It feels more real, it feels weightier, higher stakes. And this word that I can’t find [laughs], it’s not “dark.”

It would be satisfying to see you start exploring her

human nature and bringing her out of the cartoon realm for that weight.

EL: Humanity in the sense of credibility, believability. The more that a character triumphs without effort, never sweats, never bleeds, never loses, you don’t sympathize with that character. You don’t get involved emotionally with that situation as something that engages you; you are afraid of what the outcome might be.

You’ve talked about making the environments expand beyond what we’re used to in a game, too.

EL: Yeah, the idea of a puzzle is becoming much broader. Half of Thailand, you’re in a puzzle, the whole thing is a puzzle. And there are enemies, there are objects to manipulate and understand in that puzzle.

Tomb Raider as a concept could go on for a long time, when you think about the continual expansion of the world.

EL: Nobody talks about, “I loved that part in Tomb Raider 1 where I put the gears in the wall.” You talk about, “I turned off the waterfall.” They talk about their impact on the space and what they discovered, what they did. It wasn’t about the specifics. It was about the experience, and that experience is as exciting as it ever was today.

The sense of scale is newly daunting.





Pat Sirk Environment Art Director

The making of exotic lands



INTERVIEW

What feeds your art in *Underworld*?

Pat Sirk: Mystery, I guess. Tomb Raider has everything that I really like in environments: Ancient archaeology, ancient ruins, exotic locations. Just visually it's so strong, the Mayan architecture is so decorative. And with the backdrop of thick jungle, it just asks to be explored. It's a perfect medium for a game.

That sense of mystery comes up a lot in these conversations. What are you looking to instill in your art that creates that mood for *Underworld*?

One of the biggest aspects is the sense of discovering a location. By traveling through an area heavily overgrown, where nothing is immediately visible to you, and then navigating through a maze and then suddenly coming upon a great ruin that looms up above the jungle, with shafts of light streaming through, and having that reveal. It's a moment of discovery that I think will immediately beckon the

exploration. To give the player chunks at a time and then pay off with a grand moment helps reinforce that sense of mystery. You know you are traveling through the jungle for a reason, and we want to give you a big moment of, "Wow, I've found this, now I want to explore it."

The game goes through Thailand, the Mediterranean, Mexico I believe is one location. Of all the areas in the game, is there one you are most satisfied with, something that you felt appealed your sensibilities most?

It has to be the Mexico level, the Mayan stuff, because I've been interested in the Mayan culture since I've been about 15. And having gone down to the Yucatan: We shot 10,000 images there to be used as game assets. To see that realized onscreen real-time, very satisfying. Because the architecture is accurate, I really wanted my artists to obey the Mayan architectural rules. Thailand was also very satisfying.

We went to Cambodia to shoot another 5,000 images in and around Angkor Wat, and again the artists really paid attention to the architectural style. Those areas where we could get really solid photographic reference; those really sing, in my opinion.

Just why is that accuracy so important? I can imagine you could fool the player with plenty of cut corners.

Well, my whole philosophy for the environment art in Tomb Raider was to make sure we had a foundation of believability in our architecture, in our lighting, in the plants we use. If the player can identify with the realistic things they see in our game, when we present them with the fantastic, it seems more believable. They can accept it, they're more engaged. Steven Spielberg did this a lot, at least he did in the '80s. *E.T.* is a good example. You have this fantastic story, crazy, but it takes place in suburbia, with characters we can all identify with. It lets you buy into the fantasy of it, so that's why the reality is very important to me. And I'm a realist, I enjoy trying to make things look real. Once we have the foundation in, then we can layer in some style on top of that. But if the foundation

"And with the backdrop of thick jungle, it just asks to be explored.
It's a perfect medium for a game."





“Might be once in a lifetime. I’m pushing as hard as I can to deliver this look.”

of realism is there, it gives you all the room to wiggle.

You are in an interesting place, informing a game with artistic sensibilities that you seem to really believe in.

The real world becomes the game world.

I’ve been thinking about that a great deal, and I just feel like this is the project that I’ve always dreamed of doing. For some reason, all these things that I love—

archaeology, computer graphics, ancient history—it’s all come together for me on this particular project. Might be once in a lifetime. I’m pushing as hard as I can to deliver this look.

What is the essence of that look, beyond the mystery/believability thing?

That’s a good question. We would like National Geographic-style moments of beauty, but as you descend into the more fantastic, then the stylization becomes stronger and stronger. The outer layer of the onion, so to speak, would be grounded in beautiful compositions, beautiful color arrangement, and as you proceed into the underworld, the art becomes more and more colorful, fanciful, vibrant, even more mysterious. It’s difficult to summarize the global look of the game because it does change so much.

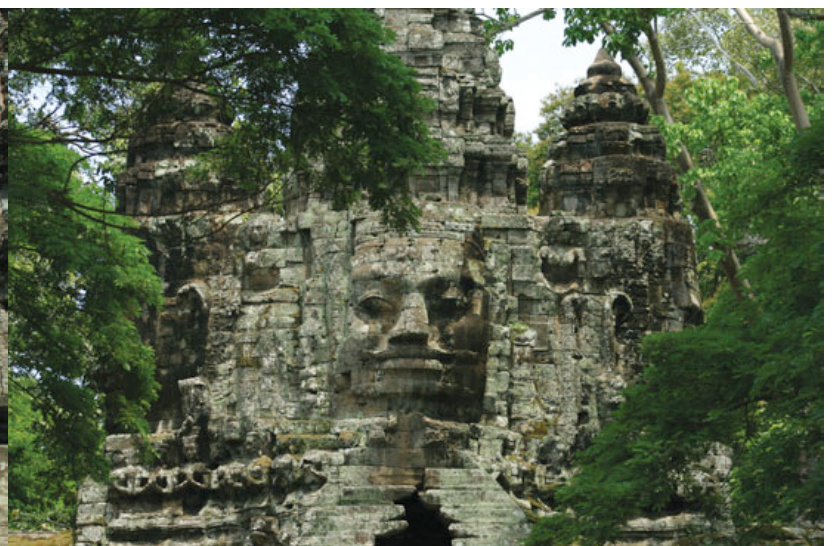
The Yucatan was definitely a prime area, because so many of the ruins there are in such excellent shape. Much of our photography done there was not just nicely composed photographs, we would shoot details of stone, entire facades of Mayan buildings, literally, to be used as assets to be put on geometry in the game.

You traveled to Thailand, too, right?

Frankly, it was brutal. After the flight, 12-hour flight, I think I had maybe four hours of sleep and hit the field immediately. I didn’t stop for six days. I was exhausted, the heat, I couldn’t drink enough water. It was grueling; just as I left the country about six days later did I adjust to the time, it was a nightmare. However, the beauty of the architecture was just extraordinary. The detail and carving they do is phenomenal, the precision of craftsmanship is mind-blowing, truly. And we’ve really incorporated much of that artistry into our game. Next-gen really lets us sell the intricacy.

What marks the most beautiful game spaces to you?

What strikes me are very beautiful photographs. Again I bring up National Geographic, so much of that richness and color I see in much of that imagery is what I try to bring to this game. Especially that organic nature of light, which we miss so often in games. The combination of light and color and photo-realism. If I can get all that to work in harmony, I really believe we’ve created something beautiful. In short, I’m a landscape photographer. If I can convey that to the imagery you see in Tomb Raider: Underworld, I feel like I’ve succeeded.





Rock Band 2

Rock band-er

words Heather Campbell



Even better than the real thing...

Last week, backstage at *The Colbert Report*, rapper Nas started up *Rock Band* and played a Rush track. This was a few weeks after The Who played a much publicized concert at E3, promoting *Rock Band* and announcing that their *The Best of The Who* pack was a *Rock Band* exclusive. A *Rock Band* tour will soon commence, bringing large bands to medium-size venues, their tracks to hit DLC soon after.

Rock Band may be the biggest music brand name since iTunes. MTV's partnership with Harmonix (a shrewd move made before the first game) suggests that the aging outlet may have reconnected with the modern musical youth. What I'm saying here is: Who knows how long it will be before Ellen is playing *Rock Band* instead of *Guitar Hero*?

A feature list of the upcoming *Rock Band 2* upgrades could fill several pages of punctuation-free text. In brief, they include total backward compatibility with *Rock Band 1* songs and downloaded content, the ability to make set lists (to avoid pausing between songs), 80-plus new tracks (potentially all of them master tracks), online tour modes that can be continued with or without bandmates (those both virtual and in the room), daily leader boards, daily musical Battle of the Band challenges, new DLC every week, improved instrument controllers (like a guitar that has a built-in camera for sound and picture synchronization, and a drum pedal that won't break), high-quality optional instruments (i.e., a drum set that can be reconfigured to be an actual musical input device, or an actual Fender fitted with those iconic colored buttons), a robust character creation system, unique



"Rock Band may be the biggest music brand name since iTunes."

and personal album art, a training mode (that teaches improvisation for those moments when the band is allowed to do whatever it wants), a no-fail mode for children, staff characters for hire (who unlock specialized features like a money-hungry manager that rakes in more cash), and a rumored—though not confirmed—music creation system.

And then there's the inclusion of the first song from the next Guns N' Roses album, *Chinese Democracy*.

At this point, it seems like Harmonix and Red Octane should pool their resources and come up with a centralized distribution system and make all these songs playable on everyone's equipment. We're at VHS and Beta here, Coke versus Pepsi. Laserdisc versus...well, whatever Laserdisc was competing against. Pot lids. Whatever. The point is, the space between the words in Harmonix's and Red Octane's press releases? It might as well be constant screams.





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Jump in.



Infamous

With great power comes great flesh-frying effects

words Matt Cabral

The folks behind the awesome, candy-colored, cartoony Sly Cooper games are prepping to deliver a darker interactive experience. *Infamous*, a sandbox-style action title tackling the moral dilemmas facing a newly christened superhero, is dark indeed. With the fictional Empire City, Sucker Punch has crafted a world reminiscent of *The Dark Knight's* Gotham and *Blade Runner's* neon-infused post-apocalyptic Los Angeles—Bentley wouldn't last a minute here. At the center of this dying metropolis is Cole, an ordinary man who's just come to, following an explosive blast that wiped out six city blocks. He not only survives this catastrophic event—which reduced much of the city's populace to dust piles—but he now sports an impressive command of electricity; he can shoot it from his fingers and fashion electrically-charged traps and explosives.

Sucker Punch is tapping into the appeal of comic-book-inspired films and television series dealing with characters wrapping their heads around newfound, seemingly unbelievable abilities. Like *Heroes'* Hiro or *Spider-Man's* Peter Parker, Cole experiences a period of confusion where he must hone his new skills and also grapple with the responsibility he now holds, literally, in his hands. The game promises a branching moral path, but just how good or evil you can get with your lightning-fueled lethality is still to be determined. What is clear, however, is Cole's acrobatic ability; with a finesse not seen since the Persian Prince first sped across a vertical wall, Cole can ride atop subway cars, scale skyscrapers, and jump, duck, and dive with incredible ease. He can also hop on telephone poles and sap their energy to revive his own power.

While the title's still a year out, it's obvious the gameplay will focus on environmental puzzles solved through Cole's "shocking" new skills, and, even more so, intense action that'll see you frying baddies aplenty. Those receiving burnt eyebrows courtesy of Cole will include thugs named Reapers, who are attempting to take over the post-disaster

streets, as well as villains who've received an evil upgrade since the blast. While little is known about these other superpowered beings, we're expecting some epic comic-book-style showdowns. From its gritty realism and open world to its original superhero story and acrobatic ass-kicking star, *Infamous* looks like a promising new property from a development team whose previous credits include creating a thieving cartoon raccoon.

Super-charged super hero.

"Cole can hop on telephone poles and sap their energy to revive his own power."

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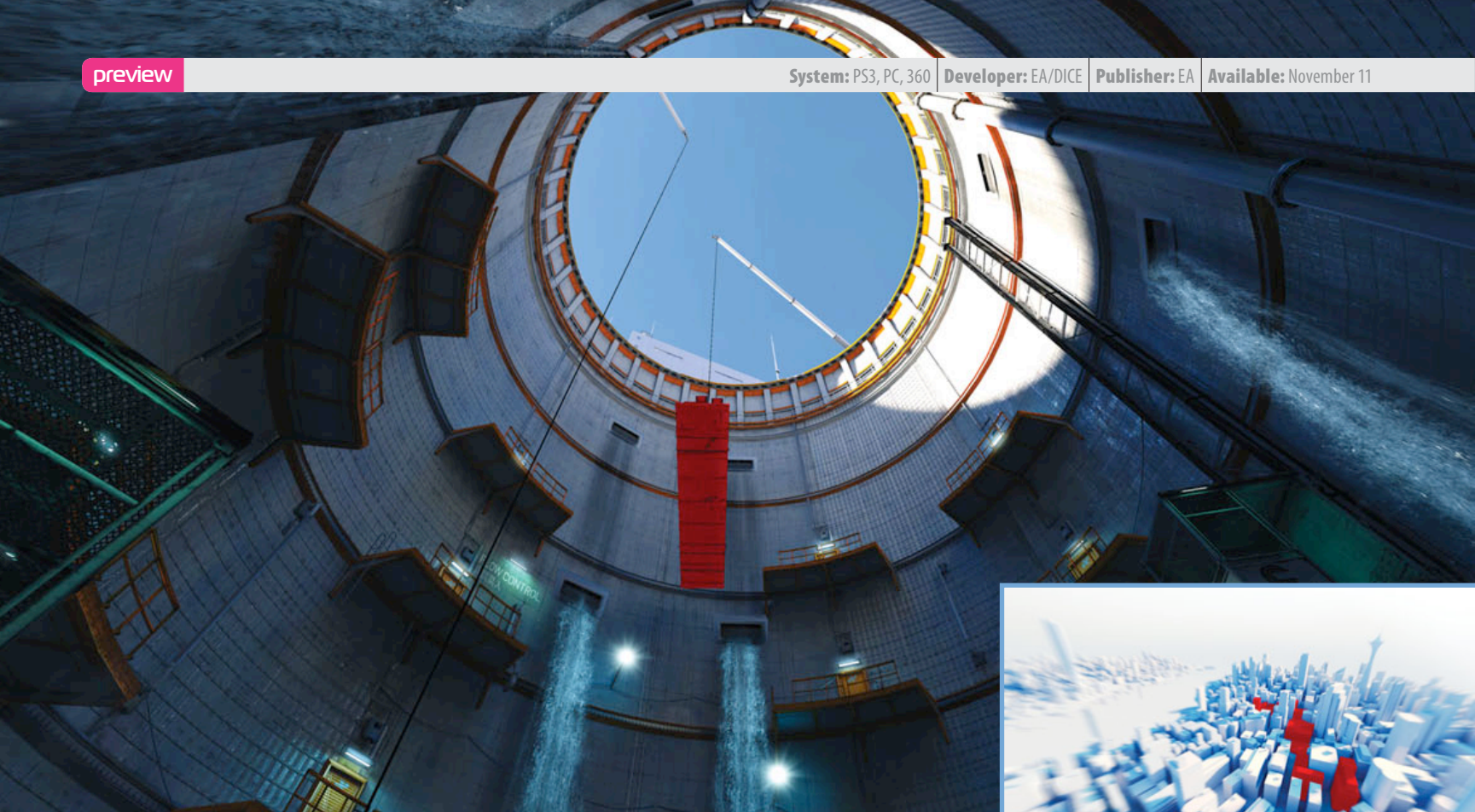
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Mirror's Edge

Red Running Hood

words Heather Campbell

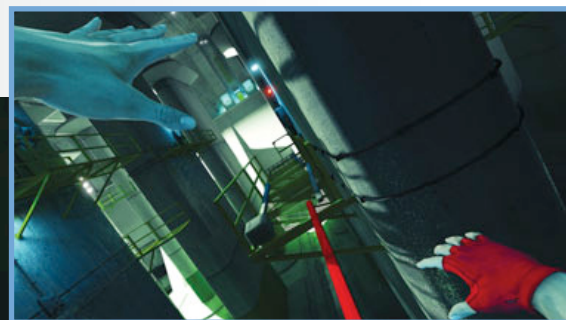
Mirror's Edge is one of those games that gives you real hope about the industry. In a time when sequels prevail—and original IPs fail—Mirror's Edge demonstrates that even a market heavy like EA is interested in a little risk and innovation.

Play magazine readers know that we're excited about Mirror's Edge—after all, it's already been on the cover. It's precisely this kind of game that makes us passionate about gaming. A new visual aesthetic, a new kind of core gameplay, and a new heroine. A game that rewards players for never firing a weapon (it's an achievement). A game that demonstrates a depth of design both in level layout and color palette, which suggests that developers were asking each other the right questions during pitch sessions.

The story, as you may know, goes a little like this: In the future, the government regulates information in a world where protest is punishable by death. In order to dodge censorship and transmit sensitive information, handlers called "Runners" are employed by both private and corporate clients to physically carry packets across the city. Faith, whose parents were killed by this controlling regime, is one such Runner. Mirror's Edge is like the world of *Johnny Mnemonic*, under the watchful eyes of 1984...with architecture by Apple.

New details about interaction with the environment have emerged after E3 and Comic-Con (where the title was shown to the public). The core gameplay remains navigational—this is a true platformer in 3-D—and, quite frankly, reminds me a little of

"...like the world of *Johnny Mnemonic*, under the watchful eyes of 1984...with architecture by Apple."



Sonic the Hedgehog's original two-dimensional titles in that momentum is used pass through or engage obstacles. Linking together chains of momentum, players build up momentum in order to leap large gaps or avoid enemies. Puzzles occur organically as an extension of the environment; instead of switches or blocks, the challenge is: How do I get to that ledge over there?

Faith's heightened senses illuminate possible routes in red, but the real path of navigation is more open. Players can avoid using red runways whenever they want; indeed, sometimes the red "hints" are misleading, detouring to lengthy secondary paths. This red Runner-vision can also be turned off entirely, rendering the cold and clean world more difficult to traverse.

November can't come fast enough. Hopefully, the game will be a success in both execution and sales. Otherwise, it'll be Faith no more. (I'm sorry. Oh man, I'm so sorry. It's just that sometimes you really need a way to end these previews, and puns are such easy closers. Really, I'm just excited about the game. I hope it turns out great.)



His list of demands is short and sweet.

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TROUBLE IN PARADISE



Jump in.



System: Wii | Developer: Platinum Games | Publisher: Sega | Avail: TBA 2009

MadWorld

A new kind of crazy

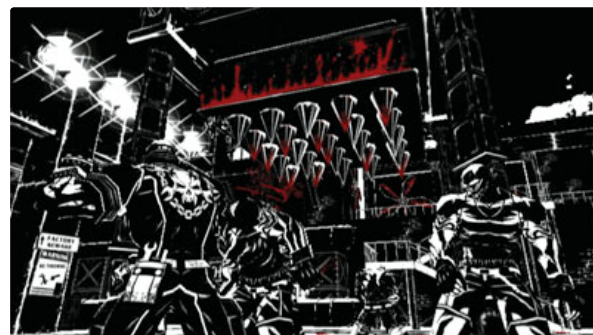
One look at MadWorld and you'd swear you were spying the latest bizarre masterpiece from Suda 51. However, despite the stylized visuals, way-over-the-top violence, and mature humor (ironically, all exclusive on the family-friendly Wii), the Killer 7 and No More Heroes crazy man has nothing to do with it. Platinum Games, who are also developing the equally ambitious Bayonetta, are actually conducting this blood-soaked symphony, and their extreme approach just may give the ESRB a coronary.

The visuals—strikingly similar to a graphic novel—are primarily black-and-white, contrasted by gushing amounts of bright red life juice. The reason for this rising blood flood is bad-boy protagonist Jack; he's participating in a *Running Man*-like kill-or-be-killed game show, and we're betting he's the favored contestant. With an ultra-violent Wiimote-controlled moveset, including impaling, beheading, and whatever the specific term is for jabbing street signs into skulls, Jack is taking no prisoners. The only thing as colorful as the limb-lopping, cranium-



"One look at MadWorld and you'd swear you were spying the latest bizarre masterpiece from Suda 51."

crushing action is the hilarious commentary played over this constant bloodbath. We'd like to share some sample dialogue, but this stuff goes way beyond F-bombs. Hear it for yourself (once you've sent the kiddies to bed) when this one lands with all the subtlety of a spike through a scrotum next year. **Matt Cabral**



System: PSN | Developer: That Game Company | Publisher: SCEA | Avail: Fall 2008



Flower

Interactive garden of delights



At first glance, Flower appears to be more of a soul-soothing video you might find looping on a monitor at a high-end spa than a videogame. However, crafted by the folks who brought us the fresh, can't-put-it-down flow, this flora-focused title is, in fact, an interactive experience. Players essentially control the wind—and, more importantly, the petals that get caught up in it—as they grow long, flowing, flowery tails with the help of serene music-based cues. The combination of relaxing ambient audio and lush visuals could lull you into a peaceful sleep, if the experience weren't so damn addictive. But the act of transforming a lonely, windowsill-sitting petal into a flourishing trail of flowers mesmerizes the senses in a way we've never quite seen in a game. Navigating all the wind-whipping with intuitive SIXAXIS controls only enhances this totally original offering. Flower just might be the title to finally tap into that hard-to-reach tree-hugging, hippy-loving, hybrid-car-driving demographic. Go green! **Matt Cabral**

"...crafted by the folks who brought us the fresh, can't-put-it-down flow..."

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Gears of War 2

War of the worlds

words Brady Hechter

words Casey Loe

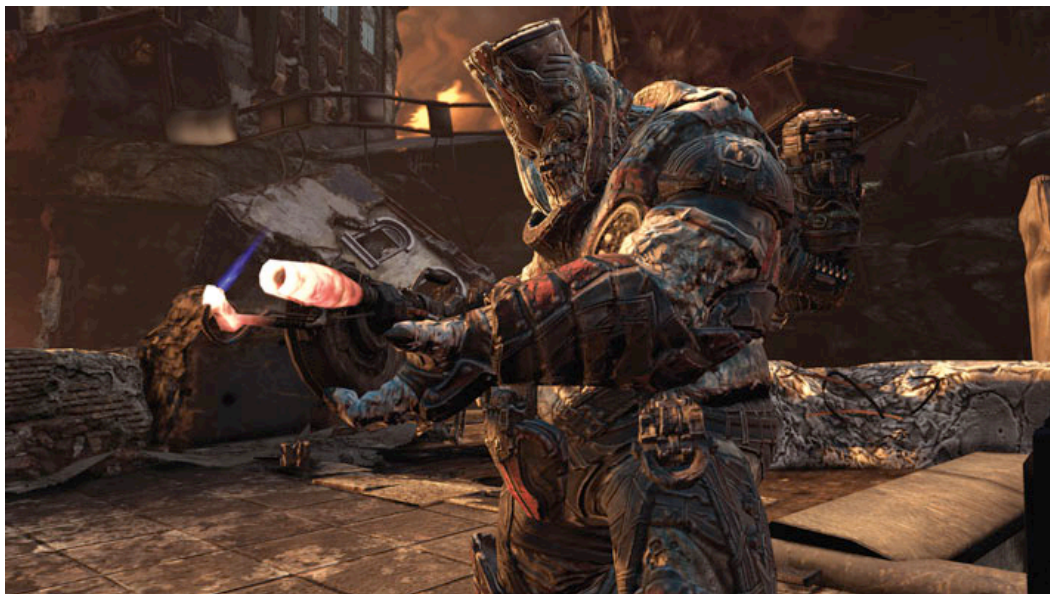
Gears of War became a multimillion seller by pleasing everyone from competitive multiplayer fanatics to gaming soloists who never strayed beyond the campaign mode. So far, the rollout on Gears 2 has been focused toward the multiplayer crowd, with a new five-player co-op mode known as "The Horde," and plenty of new competitive modes, maps, and balance tweaks. But what's in store for the follow-up to Gears of War's sweet but oh-so-short campaign mode? Lead designer Cliff Bleszinski was more than happy to provide a quick preview of the "broader, larger, and longer" campaign in Gears of War 2.

Play: When making a multiplayer sequel, there are always new modes to add, but how did you approach making a sequel for Gears of War's single-player campaign?

Cliff Bleszinski: Yeah, for multiplayer some obvious things like game modes kind of slot right in. But for the campaign it was tricky. We start with the base story. I worked with the leads for two months on a two-page treatment about where the game was going to start and where the player was going to go. I knew a lot of the plot points I wanted to see happen in the game, but I also tend to anchor around visuals and tech. I definitely knew we had to have a mountain hamlet in there. I knew we wanted a Pacific Islander-type character. I knew we wanted to have these grind lifts and these derricks... So you start with these core ideas and you can cycle outward from there to figure out how everything fills in. Once we got a talented writer like Josh [Ortega] involved, everything started collecting and snowballing from there.

How much planning were you doing on the sequel while you were still working on the original Gears of War?

We always had ideas but we never really started planning the sequel until we were really sure the first game would be a success. So once we were made aware of the ad campaign and the shipment and everything we were like, "Okay, it definitely would make sense to do a sequel." There was really no rest for us, because we went immediately from Gears 1 to Gears PC, which then had to have a cool boss battle and an extra three hours to the campaign and new multiplayer modes, and then



rolling from that right into Gears 2. It's been a busy couple of years for us since the moment we shipped the first game. But I can't complain. I'd rather be busy than bored.

And you'll roll right into Gears 3 after this?
We'll have to see how well 2 does.

So you didn't have any leftover ideas that had been cut from the original game?

I wanted crawling in the first one, I'll be honest about that. So when we finally got Gears 2 going, I said, "You gotta be able to crawl." Because for me it's so gratifying to knock somebody down and see him try to get away as a pathetic, crumpled mess. And they're trying to get toward their buddy who will revive them, and you're trying to get toward them so you can grab them and use them as a shield. And they're leaving blood trails on the ground, so you come around the corner and see

the trail and know somebody has crawled away.

I feel I've gained a little insight into your soul here. You didn't put crawling in so wounded players would have a chance to get away, but to make it all the more pathetic when they're hunted down and killed...

There's dialogue for it, too, where you pick them up and your guy says, "Where are you going?" or "I'm not done with you yet." And there are also lines when you get tagged with a grenade or stuck with a torque bow, where the guy's like, "Gaackkkk..." and he has one second to say something before he pops. It's tremendously fun, and humiliating, too.

How long would you say the campaign is, compared to the first one?

It's longer. I can't give you a number yet. And you know what, I'll never give you a number, to be honest. Because if it takes one player who's

Well, cut-scenes are still a tool that we as game designers can use. It just so happens that I, as a gamer and a game designer, prefer cut-scenes to be shorter. Three to five minutes, plain and simple. There's other ways of telling a story, such as characters putting a hand to their ear, or overhearing something on a PA system in the background, or finding discoverables like a little scrap of paper that fills in some backstory... There are many different tools in the game designers' palette to tell the story, and cut-scenes are merely one. It just so happens that certain other developers are extraordinarily good at it and like to have longer ones. That's just their taste and their design choice.

Can you talk a little more about how the COG tags are used for storytelling purposes?

The COG tags are now a subset of the collectables that go into your war journal, and that war journal has your screenshots, it has your achievements, it has all the collectibles you've found so that you can leaf through it. It sort of has this retro paper look in the game, which is really cool. So when you get a COG tag, you get to see the name and a little bit of information about the guy who dropped it, so it's a little more personal. And then you can find a journal, maybe from a scientist, or a letter home from a soldier, which we have pages upon pages of. You can find them if you want, or you can totally ignore them. That's my idea of passive narrative versus active narrative, where you're actually seeking out the story yourself—reading the poster on the wall, looking at the newspaper in the kiosk, or finding a scrap of paper, as opposed to just idly watching something.

Are you still working with a team of only 20 to 30 people?

Oh, God no. We're at 105 now.

Is it true that the original Gears was developed with a team of that size?

It was about 40. Which is why we were working 12-plus hours and 7 days a week toward the end. There was a burger joint across from where I lived and I would come home and sit there with a PBR and a burger and just a thousand-yard stare in my eyes, thinking, "Oh my God, I'm so fried."

That's the tricky thing in this day and age. It's not enough to ship a game, you have to promote it. So being responsible for balancing it and making sure it's fun, but then having to work those hours and then go on the road to some big L.A. event and be all [with feigned enthusiasm] "Hey, check out my game!" It gets even more dizzying. I mean, I love it, I wouldn't trade it for the world—I'm having the time of my life. But it's definitely a tricky balance.

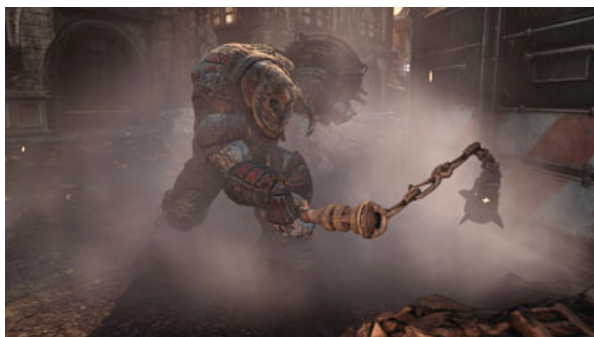
So far the rollout on Gears of War 2 has focused mainly on new multiplayer modes. When do you expect to show more of the campaign mode?

We still have plenty of aces up our sleeve. It's not just enough to make a great videogame and market it, you have to build a hype machine, and this is what it takes in this day and age to have a tremendous entertainment launch. We do have a cool new campaign demo we may be showing at E3, which may lead to some...interesting new vehicular usage, let's say.

But I don't want to spoil the campaign too much. Let's just say that there are a lot of great moments in there, and it will answer a lot of questions about the universe and maybe ask a few more.



"It's not just enough to make a great videogame and market it, you have to build a hype machine, and this is what it takes in this day and age to have a tremendous entertainment launch."

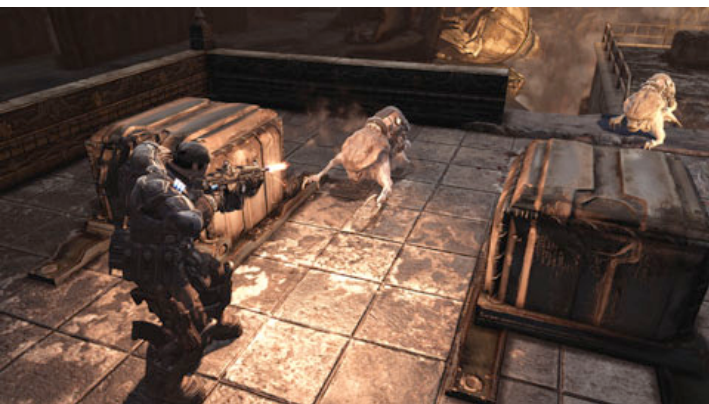


super-hardcore X hours to get through, then it'll take another player who isn't so hardcore X plus two hours. But I can definitely guarantee that it's broader in scope, larger in scale, and it's a longer campaign.

A lot of previous comments from you and your team have focused on the emotional aspects of the campaign story. Why did you feel the sequel needed more emotional resonance, when that wasn't a major part of the original title?

The Gears franchise, initially it's about the chain saws and the blood and these badass guys doing badass things, right? But there's this secondary layer of sadness to the world, which you saw in the Mad World ad, and you'll see that in the upcoming TV stuff we're doing for Gears 2. Yeah, it's still about blood and killing Locusts, but it's also about what's at stake. Humanity's last stand, a man who misses his wife, civilians who are joining the army just so their families can get food... People who are abandoned, cast off, or stranded. All of these things are in there. There's a very human side to this very tough world.

How do you tell a story like that when you're on record as being for "active storytelling" as opposed to passive storytelling through event scenes?



Golden Axe Beast Rider

Nature of the Beast

words Dave Halverson

During the late '80s and early '90s, when the majority of people still equated videogames to either "those Mario games?" or the root of all evil (good times), game publishers were defined as much by how their games looked as by the brands themselves. With so much internal development going on in Japan, you could discern a game's origin just by looking at it. Back then, the thought of a Sega, Capcom, Konami, or Nintendo game being developed externally was sheer madness. When Konami broke ranks in 1996 and signed Appaloosa to develop the first 3-D Contra (Legacy of War), the series' die-hards gasped in horror (and there were enough of them then that you could hear it). The code had been broken.

A decade later, if Konami were to announce a new Contra for Xbox 360 or PS3 being developed internally in Japan, it would be a disappointment. American, Canadian and European studios have become the backbone of the industry. These days, major game factories like EA, Activision, and THQ are defined by their external studios. Even companies with legendary in-house studios like Ubisoft have taken to picking up a studio or two to keep the pace. But with so many games coming out across so many platforms, it's getting rough out there. Deadlines and budgets loom over every project like ticking time bombs, creating a give-and-take over what goes in and what gets ditched, which can mean the difference between a hit and a miss.

When I saw Golden Axe: Beast Rider for the first time at E3 2006, I pretty much lost it. Tyrus Flare was instrumental in getting me so deep into gaming that I had no choice but to pursue it as a career. I was into my NES, but when I saw this sword-wielding Amazon fighting beside a burly little axe-toting dwarf, videogames suddenly took on a whole new



"Golden Axe is to Segaphiles what a game like Metroid is to Nintendo fans, only we've been waiting 15 years for an update..."



combat and atmosphere, I left as a very happy Golden Axe fan.

Fans are going to love Golden Axe: Beast Rider, but I'm not sure how much of the mainstream press will appreciate it for what it is. Golden Axe was an arcade action game conceived to gobble quarters, not provide hours of satisfying gameplay, and even by those standards, it wasn't all that great a game. Arcade games relied heavily on visuals.



meaning. I can only identify with male protagonists (as long as they're from cartoons, fantasy, or mythology), but I prefer heroines to heroes.

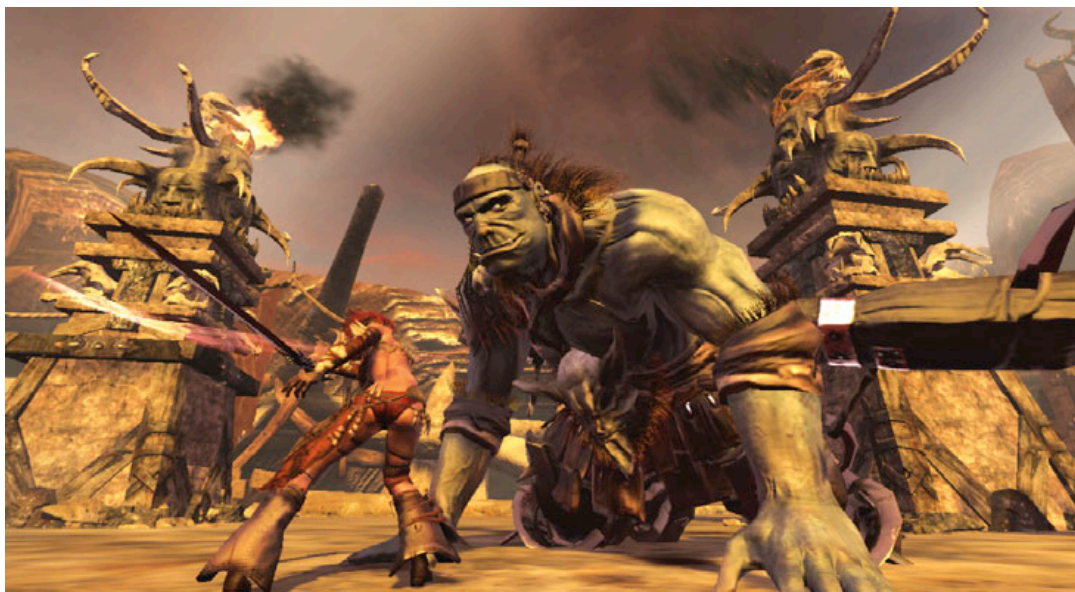
Golden Axe is to Segaphiles what a game like Metroid is to Nintendo fans, only we've waited 15 years for an update, and Sega's track record with their marquee brands isn't exactly glowing. SoJ's Altered Beast update, Project Altered Beast, was so ghastly they canceled its flight, and they've yet to produce a Shinobi worthy of existing in the same hemisphere as the classic Revenge. Golden Axe: Beast Rider is a pivotal game for Sega. If they do well with a tent-pole franchise like Axe, SoJ will surely keep them coming.

When I visited the Secret Level offices last year for our Beast Rider cover story, it only took five minutes to realize that Golden Axe was in the right hands. They'd already had series creator Makoto Uchida in for his blessing, and were knee-deep into converting their concepts into practical models. Not a few token boogie-boogies and beasts; the walls were covered with the kind of extraordinarily beautiful, hand-drawn art you automatically concede cannot be duplicated in 3-D. As they began dropping the art into their own personal matrix, I knew that, if nothing else, Beast Rider was going to be a gorgeous game with an absurd amount of muscularity and detail in its creatures and many a curvaceous body to ogle. After seeing some level design concepts and getting a taste of the balance they were shooting for, a mixture of



You'd dump \$10 worth of quarters just to see all of a game's levels and bosses. What Golden Axe had was that trademark Sega mystique and stickiness, a mixture of music, sound effects, and graphics that made an intoxicating potion. I think it would be a mistake for Secret Level to do anything but elevate that form to the modern-day equivalent, and based on the early code they so graciously provided, we're definitely on the same page. The combat on foot uses a color-based Heavenly Sword-type block or evade-and-parry, and on beast-back it is simply empowering. The beasts, of which there are many to coincide with the conditions, are a huge component, and Secret Level has done a stunning bit of creature design. Tyrus can also use the Golden Axe as she explores and assembles it, targeting visual clues to trigger events or far-off enemies.

It's high time we got ourselves a big seventh-generation action game. There's no rule book that says a game has to have more than a singular focus to entertain. In fact, I often feel developers tack on unnecessary complexity at the expense of gameplay to pacify the press. I'm okay with stepping on a platform to open a nearby gate when it's within the context of the design, rather than a superfluous element masquerading as design. In Golden Axe, such barriers are a means of indicating whether you've completely cleared that area of enemies—a condition of progressing. The line between simplicity and lazy design requires a keen eye. If I want to assign attributes, sit through lengthy cinematics, or unravel environmental puzzles, I'll play a game designed to excel in those areas. There are plenty of great ones to choose from. What I want from Golden Axe: Beast Rider is raw action, straight up and bloody, topped off with some reverential touches, a true Sega OST, and, given the period and nature of this beast, I'm gonna need some of those other Amazons to do their part to counter all the bloodletting.



What'd I tell you!
The art department
at Secret Level must
never leave.

Megaman

The Ambition's Revival!!

words Heather Campbell

Of all the projects coming out of E3, Mega Man 9 is either the riskiest or most intelligent game choice being made by any of the major companies. With retro-styled graphics (and music that would sound at home in a chiptunes concert...or an OST release from 1991), Mega Man 9 was the game that everyone was e-mailing each other about as soon as the news hit the wire. *Did you hear about the new Mega Man game? It's 2-D, and looks like an NES game! How do we do an HD trailer of an NES game?!*

To find out more about how the hell this happened, *Play* talked to a visibly exhausted Hironobu Takeshita. After three tiring days of E3, the producer fought off his jet lag and was kind enough to answer all of our questions about the game... including the one that's been secretly plaguing us all since the beginning of Mega Man 1.

play: Thanks so much for taking time out at the end of your day to sit down with us.

Hironobu Takeshita: Oh, no problem at all!

We are so excited about Mega Man 9. What was it like, behind the scenes? What was the journey to this game? At what point did everyone sit down and decide, "We're going to make another classic Mega Man game!"

Well, the initial impetus behind making this game was Mr. [Keiji] Inafune. He's always wanted to make another Mega Man game. He always talks about how the fans in America are always asking, "When can we get Mega Man 9? When are we going to see another one?" And so, he's always been thinking about that... but there's never been really a time that seemed right to bring it out, nor an appropriate way of delivering it to the fans, as well. But now, we have things like Live Arcade and Virtual Console, and there's the fact that people are starting to re-evaluate retro games as good games—graphics aside—they were just good, fun games. All those elements coming together just seemed like now was the right time to bring out Mega Man. With the NES as one of the virtual systems on the Wii, we thought, "Why don't we do that? Why don't we re-create that style?"

Do you see this as an opportunity to use game concepts that have developed in the last 20 years in an 8-bit game—you know, take the things you've learned and put them inside an old cartridge? Or is this going to be straightforward 8-bit play, as if the last 20 years had not happened?

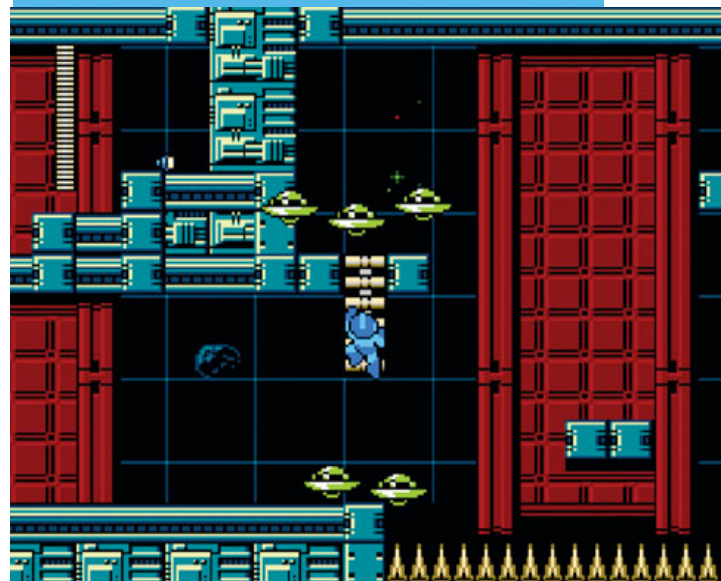
Well, obviously the tools we used to develop a game like this are all modern. The old equipment

is broken or it just doesn't exist anymore. We can't find it. Things like that. So we have to use new-school equipment to make an old-school game. But the company that we worked with to develop this game—Inti Creates—most of them have worked on previous Mega Man games from the 8-bit and 16-bit era. So they're familiar with what goes into an 8-bit-style game. So for us, the challenge was limiting ourselves to what can be put into an NES-style game. And all our collective knowledge of what goes into an NES-style game came into play during development. We had to know when to limit ourselves, like, "Oh, this is too many colors," or, "The sound—it's not exactly NES-style sound." All that went into consideration when making this game. We wanted to truly re-create an NES-type game.

There's so much buzz about this game already, I can only imagine it will be a huge success. If it is, will you continue creating retro-style Mega Man games? Will we see, perhaps, a 16-bit style, 32-bit style, et cetera...maybe even revisiting the limited polygon count of original PlayStation games, for a PS1-era Mega Man game?

Let me see. Making an 8-bit game was pretty challenging. But if it works, then, sure—why not—we can do 16-bit and 32-bit and whatnot after that. The problem is, with the evolution of game systems themselves, with each successive generation they get more powerful and then everyone starts thinking you need these super graphics to match the capabilities of these systems. You have 3-D graphics and surround sound and all that stuff. People think since you have these new systems, that's what you should do. And for some creators, it's just easier to go that route. For us, we don't want to think of

"For us, we don't want to think of it as 8-bit graphics that we're doing. It's not 8-bit graphics; it's an art style. It's a choice."





"...the whole point of Mega Man 9 is to re-create the feel of Mega Man 1 and 2."

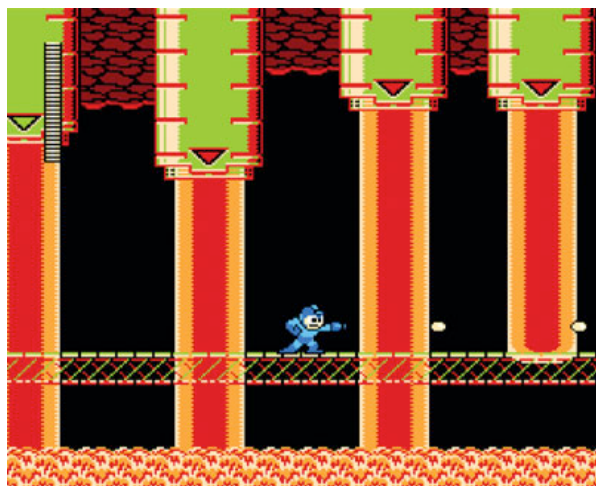
it as 8-bit graphics that we're doing. It's not 8-bit graphics; it's an art style. It's a choice. And we hope that by doing this, it expands the types of genres or styles that can be done in the gaming industry. And I think there's a place for games like this in the industry. If this is a successful game—I hope it's a successful game—then, maybe, yes, we can make more Mega Man games like this, or maybe revive other franchises. Give them the similar treatment.

I'm curious if you've played these independent retro-styled games that are coming out now? Games like N+? Specifically, I'm thinking of Cave Story, which draws inspiration from games like Mega Man.

Do you know who makes it?

It's an independent. Studio Pixel is the official title of the studio, but it's just a single Japanese developer.

If it's the game I'm thinking of, I've seen it. I just haven't been able to play it. Just seeing it, it has become a point of reference for Mega Man. But for the game itself, playing Mega Man 1 and 2 were more important as far as research goes, because the whole point of Mega Man 9 is to re-create the feel of



Mega Man 1 and 2.

I would assume that's why there's no charge shot, no sliding...at least in the demo that we've seen. Is that true?

Yes.

Good choice.

[Laughs.]

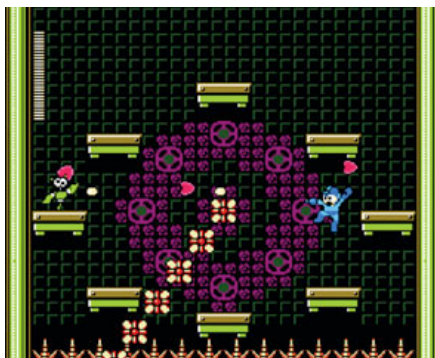
My theory on Mega Man games is that what makes them popular, beyond the great character designs, the great level designs—the engine that keeps these games going is the music. It's so amazing. How difficult was it to re-create those 8-bit-style songs in this day and age? Do you have more than one composer on the game, or is it just one composer?

On this game there were two composers. And by two, I guess you could say that there was one head, lead composer, and then an assistant composer. So the lead composer, he had experience making NES games, so he brought that experience to Mega Man 9, because he knew the limits of the sound—it only had the four sound system, basically. It's really difficult now to do that. It was difficult back then, when we made the other Mega Man games. But you're limited with the sounds you can use. And those sounds have to sound like they're an orchestrated soundtrack. And so you have to take the rhythm, the melody line, and put them all together. The composer—he knew the limitations, but he was struggling really hard with them, to recapture that feel as accurately as possible. And it's really calculated—to what extent you can mix the sounds, to make it sound orchestrated. But in the end, I think it turned out well.

May I ask who your favorite boss character is? Out of all the Mega Man games?

Hmmm. That's kind of a difficult question. We're talking about bosses. The bosses. Well...thinking about it, I'm going to have to go with Guts Man. From the first game. I don't know, for some reason he just really sticks out in my mind. The image of him. For all the bosses, I think the early games in the series—those bosses were really well designed. They were simple. But they were good. I really liked that. They seemed to get a little more complex later on. They all seemed to have their own personalities, their own traits, which made them memorable. But my favorite? I guess I'm going to have to go with Guts Man.

Under the hood, so to speak, of the new Mega Man game—are the bosses' patterns still the same simple attacks that they had in the old days? Or have you maybe, secretly, taken



advantage of the hardware and given them more complicated patterns than they would have had in the '80s and '90s?

For this game, we kept it like the old style. We didn't use any modern techniques. You control Mega Man, and he's got to avoid the bosses and try and attack them. There is software now that can create more complex movements, but this is a retro game...so the bosses still follow the same basic patterns that the old games had.

Is there any chance—and I know it's unlikely—that you would be releasing an extremely limited edition NES or Famicom cartridge of this game?

[Laughs.]

Very expensive, limited edition.

That's something we didn't discuss with Nintendo. Talking about the possibility of it...I think it's pretty low. [Laughs.] It doesn't mean I'm against the idea; I'd like to see it. Talking about the cartridges, the piece inside—the memory—is quite low. I don't know if it could hold [the game] to the same extent. And just getting a hold of the materials to make that would be almost impossible. But because it's impossible, it kind of makes me want to see it more. I wouldn't mind having one myself! I think that would be cool.

Okay, one more serious question, and then an extremely serious one. First, Mega Man Powered Up was an update of the classic Mega Man, with modern graphics for a modern machine. Though it was beautiful, some fans were disappointed because it was rendered in polygons. Is there any chance of seeing a new two-dimensional Mega Man game, with sprites drawn in a more expanded library of colors, taking advantage of new hardware? Like Bionic Commando Rearmed, or, well, Symphony of the Night, or Odin Sphere? Or do you see two-dimensional games as a retro experience only?

First, I have to say that we haven't really decided anything about the future of Mega Man in particular. We're just coming out with this game, and we have to see the reaction and how this goes. And with Mega Man 9, the whole point was to go back to the 8-bit style. And bring back the NES-style gaming. We concentrated so much on that, and I don't know if we'd be interested in, say, remaking this game so soon. We'd have to give it some thought; it's not outside of the realm of possibility. We really have to see how things go for now.

Alright. Final question. At the beginning of every Mega Man level, Mega Man comes down from the sky in a single stripe. Is he falling? Or is he being beamed? He looks like he's a different shape as he comes out of the sky...

[Laughs.] Yeah, what is that?! I'll have to ask Mr. Inafune to see what he says about that. I don't know. I'm going to have to say it looks like he's teleporting in from somewhere. But the truth of the matter is, I'm not really certain. I'll have to ask Mr. Inafune, but...I think he's teleporting in.

Okay, thank you very much for your time!
Thank you!

It's official. Teleporting.
Teleporting. [Laughs.]

Mega Man 9 hits in September 1989. I mean, 2008.

Crash Bandicoot

Mind over Mutant

Another party to Crash!

words Dave Halverson



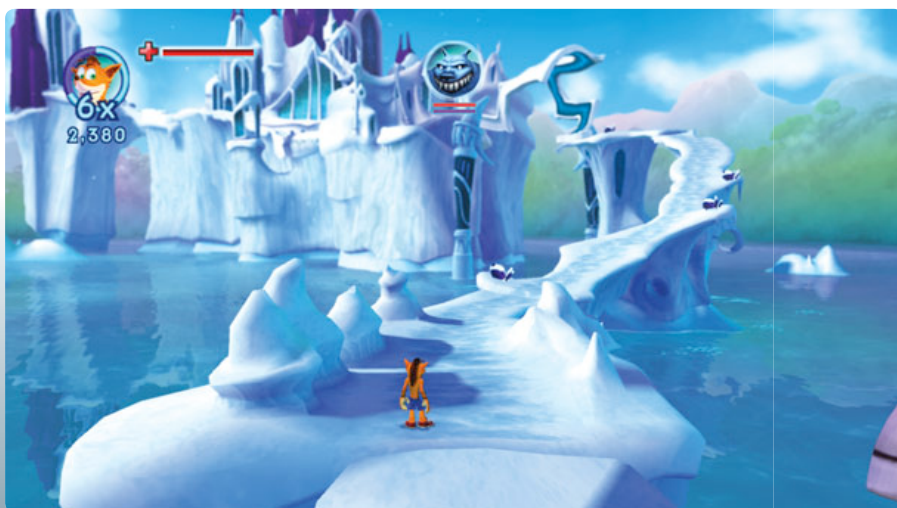
For a while there, Crash was being passed around like an altar boy at a Pope rally until Sierra finally found him a proper home at Radical Entertainment, who, after a wobbly yet unique start with the hybrid Tag Team Racing, found their stride with Crash of the Titans. With *Mind over Mutant*, Radical officially cut the cord: Crash Bandicoot is now Radical property, with no more ties to Traveler's Tales or Naughty Dog. Transition sequence terminated; subject is ready for action.

Mind over Mutant isn't the quintessential franchise-redefining, next-generation sequel I've been waiting for—damn, PS2 and Wii, foiled again!—but it's more than the next best thing. As unique as both *Twinsanity* and *Titans* were, I'd have to say that *MoM* is the most ambitious Crash game yet. By combining a massive (absolutely breathtaking) overworld, cavernous inner sanctums, and Titan-style piggyback gameplay, Radical have created a seamless "free-romping" paradise covered in wall-to-wall gameplay. Crash even has a hovel that kinda reminds me of Banjo's place. Scouting the outer realm, where the story unfolds via the brilliant (as always) comedy writing and voice act-

"As unique as both *Twinsanity* and *Titans* were, I'd have to say that *MoM* is the most ambitious Crash game yet."

ing synonymous with the brand since Sierra took over, Crash takes on a multitude of environmental challenges, scaling sheer cliffs, swinging from ropes, negotiating moving platforms, manipulating massive rock formations, and so on.

When Crash is teamed up with one of the game's beasts, however, *Wumpa Island* takes on an entirely new complexion. Crash can now store the monster of his choice in his pocket (once jacked) and switch beasts on the fly to negotiate the game's super-size environmental challenges. The game plays out like a seamless real-time saga as Crash travels on foot, talks to indigenous creatures, crosses into intersecting worlds—literally, you see the new one and go there—explores cavernous regions for new species, and, of course,

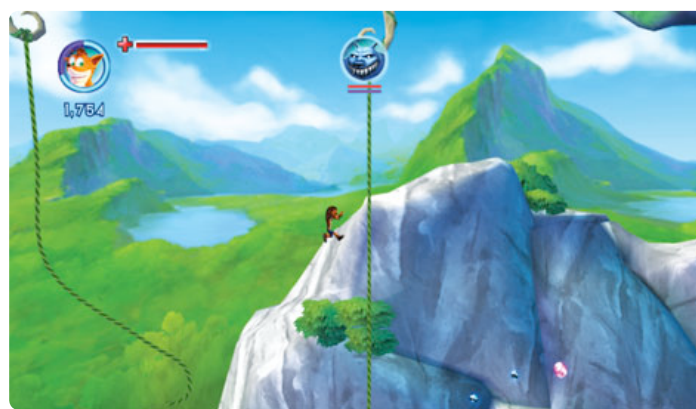


does what Crash loves best, being the violent (when angered) bandicoot that he is. The spin move is pretty much optional these days when it comes to fistcuffs. Crash can string together some wicked combos, and with the new roll-and-counter system inflict extra pain on the various foes that dare cross his loony orange path. Looks like someone at Radical did some reading up on real-life bandicoots, too, because Crash can finally dig, although not in the practical sense. He chooses to stand on the clearly marked area and spin his way underground to forage for bonus items.

As for Cortex, or the newly rejuvenated Cortex, as they call him (he got his mojo back), he and N. Brio have devised a text-messaging, multimedia, head-mounted (and mutating mind-controlling)

display and taken to the airwaves with their own (hilarious) infomercial, and business is brisk. Here comes a happy customer now. Say, isn't that Crash's sister, Coco? Not to worry, no Daphne complex here. In fact, Coco is playable in co-op, complete with her own treasure-hunting skills! Oh yeah, this is going to be interesting.

We'll have to wait a while longer for a dedicated Xbox 360 or PS3 Crash epic, but in the meantime, Radical sure know how to tide us over. They've created a world so beautifully modeled and textured for MoM, it looks like you're playing in a painting, and they've topped it off with unbridled addictive fun and another perfectly pitched soundtrack. I can't wait to see how deep this particular bandicoot hole goes.





PURE

If you build it, you will come

words Dave Halverson

You won't find anything about soaring through the air on 400 pounds of chromoly, plastic, and rubber under the definition of pure. Skim down a bit, however, and you will find the words *absolute*; *utter*; *sheer*. After hours of painstaking research and careful scrutiny, I've concluded that that is exactly what the people at Blackrock Studio had in mind when they set out to make their mark on the ever budding echelon of off-road racing. Like *MotorStorm*, the game that set the current generation bar, *Pure* has a style and tack all its own, built on a robust engine flush with today's most advanced console tech, like real-time dirt accumulation, terrain deformation, cloth effects, advanced physics, and photo-realistic graphics. It's an absolutely *stunning* game, *utterly* captivating *sheer* entertainment.

As sticky as the racing is, from the tutorial on (don't worry, it's short and necessary), what hits you first is *Pure*'s decidedly unique presentation. From the pre-race loading screen through the obligatory flyby, staging, and start, not only does *Pure* have the kind of distinctive style you'd expect from a budding racing franchise, but getting there is half the fun.

The centerpiece of *Pure* is its globetrotting World Tour, covering some 30-odd tracks within a series of four, five, six, and seven-event stages divided among three classes: Race (big broad tracks, long laps, big air), Sprint (short fast laps



"The centerpiece of *Pure* is its globetrotting World Tour, covering some 30-odd tracks..."



“As refined as both quad and rider are, I’d settle for a monkey on a tricycle, given Pure’s superlative track design, spot-on physics, and exceptionally well-thought-out controls...”

Can you fly, Bobby?

with an emphasis on adept braking and choosing the right line), and Freestyle, which is typically a misnomer for “ill-fated afterthought that forced us to limit the game elsewhere.” There’s no bigger drain of development dollars or waste of disk space than the usual hackneyed freestyle venue, a ball-and-chain affixed to convey that a game is “extreme” the same way 12 ounces of soda in a quart of ice qualifies as “Super Sized.” But not here. Pure’s freestyle events take place on the same tracks as the core races do, only dotted with midair reappearing icons for stunt multipliers, special tricks, flame outs, and, most importantly, gas, since whatever place you’re in when you run out is where you stay. Between the precariously placed icons (16 racers, ultrawide track, you get the picture) and the game’s simple preload/launch controls, the freestyle venues play like a game unto

themselves, offering a temporary reprieve from all those lump-filled stadiums.

Back on point, you begin the game with a single garage space to build your first (D-level) quad, then earn subsequent spaces as you rack up points earning parts, new tracks, special tricks, and rider skins. The key is building the right bike for each class, based on your personal riding style (or you can always opt for Quick Build and let the CPU take a crack at it, if you’re just not into it), as you make your way up the World Rankings from D- to A-class machines. This is where most build-it-yourself racers get bogged down via clumsy interface, unintelligible gear-head superfluosness, or worse yet, one of those swell narratives we all love so much, based on the marketing department’s latest autonomous survey. Watching your four-wheeled beast take shape piece by piece in seamless real-

time, ogling viewpoints to the chunky garage tunes and sound effects, is a surprisingly rewarding part of the Pure experience. How you build each vehicle has a direct and profound impact on performance that you can readily see and feel (another rarity), creating a bond (you get to name them, too) between man or woman and machine as if they were characters in the game.

It’s usually the riders that determine performance, but Pure’s pilots are more about personal preference. They each have their own signature tricks, unique style, and mannerisms, but skill-wise, it’s even-steven. As refined as both quad and rider are, I’d settle for a monkey on a tricycle, given Pure’s superlative track design, spot-on physics, and exceptionally well-thought-out controls, beginning with a simple (and not in the least bit finicky) pull-back/flick preload trigger that lets you focus on what you do in the air, not getting there. The camera is right on, too, sitting right up on the racers’ shoulders as the flag drops and then settling back to provide the optimal angle, like having your own personal cameraman. You can look around freely but there’s no need to adjust near to far, leaving you to concentrate on more important things like the Flaming Thrill Bar (to hell with subtlety, right?), the sole gameplay hook on which the whole enchilada relies. Performing A-button tricks (any direction and A) fills the gauge to B and then B tricks to Y, leading up to the pants-wetting A-B-Y airborne combo. The bar also represents boost, so if you’re more into straight-ahead racing, you can make a living with simple A-button combos and frequent boosting, or a combination of both. Your quad factors in as well. The better suited to the venue and your particular riding style, the better you’ll perform, but that, of course, is up to you.





System: Wii | Developer: Konami | Publisher: Konami | Avail: November 18

Castlevania Judgment

The classic series steps into the fighting arena

The good news: Castlevania is finally coming to "next-gen"! The quality-of-which-is-yet-to-be-determined news: It's a two-player fighting game! Series producer Koji "IGA" Igarashi has joked about a potential motion-control 'vania with physical whip-cracking action since the Wii's debut; as it turns out, he wasn't kidding. Castlevania Judgment will be a free-roaming, Wiimote-waving, Power Stone-style versus beat-'em-up, with characters hailing from all eras of the series' 1,000-year history: Simon, Alucard, Dracula, Maria, and Shanoa from the upcoming Order of Ecclesia have been confirmed so far. In a move that has polarized fans, the unusual character designs are being handled by manga artist Takeshi Obata, of Death Note and Hikaru no Go fame. A far cry from Ayami Kojima's willowy, androgynous designs, Obata's character reimaginings lean strongly toward a more traditional anime look. At this point we remain skeptical (but cautiously optimistic) about how a Castlevania fighting game might work; let us hope we are all pleasantly surprised when the game drops in November. **Nick Des Barres**

"The good news: Castlevania is finally coming to 'next-gen'!"



System: Xbox 360 | Developer: Ensemble Studios | Publisher: Microsoft | Avail: TBA

Halo Wars

More Halo

Interstellar peace be damned: The popular Halo franchise makes the transition to the brave new world of console-based real-time strategies with Halo Wars.

Wars is being built expressly for the Xbox 360 by Ensemble Studios, the makers of the popular PC RTS series Age of Empires. This is extremely good news, considering PC-to-console translations of strategy games tend to suffer in the condensing of gameplay elements and controls.

The game takes place in 2351, with players able to command human and covenant forces in this futuristic war. Traditional RTS elements allow players to create a base from which to stage operations. Buildings can then be placed accordingly, and human forces will have access to vehicle and command depots, missile silos, and barracks. Stressing realism, Ensemble has fleshed out each building with neat little additions: Human soldiers pump out push-ups, mechanics tinker with Warthogs, and soldiers stand guard over silos.

Players will be able to jump canyons with Warthogs, use Scorpion tanks to assault enemy bases, and destroy huge Scarab walkers with air strikes from an orbiting spaceship, Spirit of Fire. Ensemble promises new vehicles (such as the human anti-aircraft tank, the Wolverine) and multiplayer mayhem. The war will commence, most likely, in 2009.

Greg Orlando



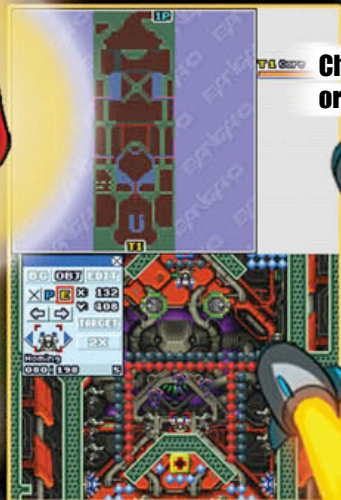
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System: PSN | Dev: Darkstar Industries | Pub: SCEA | Avail: TBA

Fat Princess

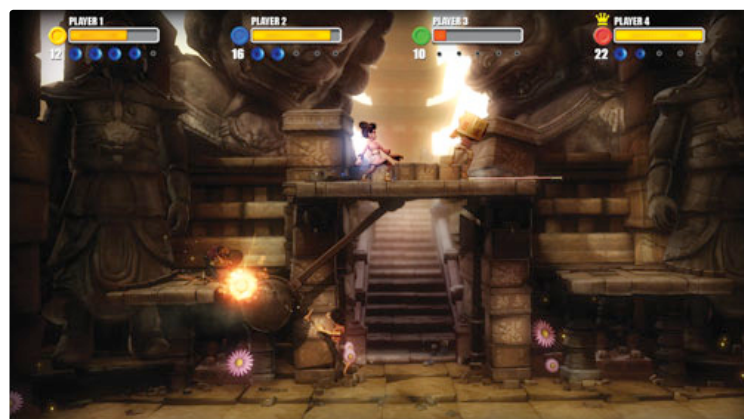
Videogame montages have become a staple of the E3 press briefings, and sometimes, stuck between the clip of the newest football refresh and the footage of that action game you've already seen countless times before, something special shows up, catching your eye and making you wonder what in the world it is that you just saw. At Sony's E3 2007 event, that game for me was Echochrome; this year, it was a little PSN multiplayer real-time strategy title called *Fat Princess*. It's a completely hilarious looking (and slightly wrong) remix of the classic game of capture the flag. Two kingdoms are at war, and each has taken the other's princess captive. The brave and noble armies from each side are dispatched to rescue their fair maidens in their time of need. The catch to all of this is what gives the game its name: you'll be able to stuff a princess full of delicious treats, and as her waistline expands, rescue turns from the classic "ride off into the sunset" storybook ending into a group effort to carry the rotund royalty back to her castle. For this, *Fat Princess* will support up to 32 players, with 16 people on each side. The game includes five different character classes—Worker, Warrior, Archer, Mage, and Priest—and in a unique twist, players will be able to switch between classes on the fly whenever they choose. **Eric L. Patterson**



System: PS3 | Dev: Tarsier Studios | Pub: SCEA | Avail: TBA

Rag Doll Kung Fu: Fists of Plastic

Rag Doll Kung Fu: Fists of Plastic deserves a little history—its predecessor started out as an experimental rag-doll physics game for PC. Guys who built the original idea—Media Molecule—went on and envisioned Little Big Planet. Their first effort was mined and extended into this fighting game, in which characters with the spastic demeanor of rubbery puppets duke it out. The combat arenas aren't strictly rigid one-on-one brawls, offering you a smorgasbord of objects to grab and minigame scenarios to broaden the gameplay focus. Our motley cast of fighters are a spiritual bunch, drawing on chi attacks and other nifty flourishes. Earn points in, say, King of the Hill by busting out poses as much as noses. **Brady Fiechter**



System: PlayStation 3 | Dev: Epos | Pub: Sony | Avail: TBD

Crash Commando

The goofy, violence-laden, third-person shooter *Crash Commando* is the little game that could.

A downloadable title available through the PlayStation network, *Commando* allows 12 players to battle out with electronic soldiers equipped with jetpacks. Each soldier can take it to the opposition with a traditional slew of death dealers such as shotguns, rocket launchers, machine guns, grenades, mines, and so forth. Tanks and Jeeps will be found littering the game's eight maps, and special portals allow players to transport their warriors to different areas of a layered map.

Commando will be playable both online and off, and a single-player mode ensures even the most antisocial of game fans can enjoy the carnage. **Greg Orlando**



System: Xbox 360 | Dev: Ubisoft Montreal | Pub: Ubisoft | Avail: November 7

Naruto: The Broken Bond

One of the underappreciated games of last year, *Naruto: Rise of a Ninja* followed the first major arc of the *Naruto* anime series as an action/fighting/RPG. Developed by real fans of the show, the world of *Naruto* was blown out to the tiniest detail, and even included a DLC Japanese voice pack.

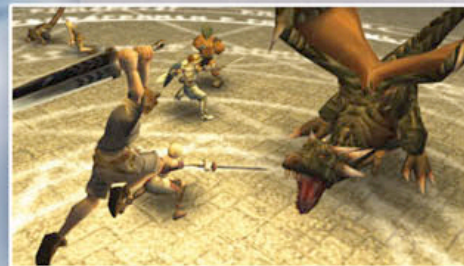
Picking up where the story left off, *Broken Bond* showcases 25 playable characters, and the ability to play as a ninja other than *Naruto*. Online fighting will be included, as well as a more open-world environment (with puzzles that rely on teamwork). The game will take players to the end of episode 135...which explains the game's title. **Heather Campbell**



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System: PS3, Xbox 360, Wii, PS2 | Developer: Sega | Publisher: Sega | Avail: November 2008

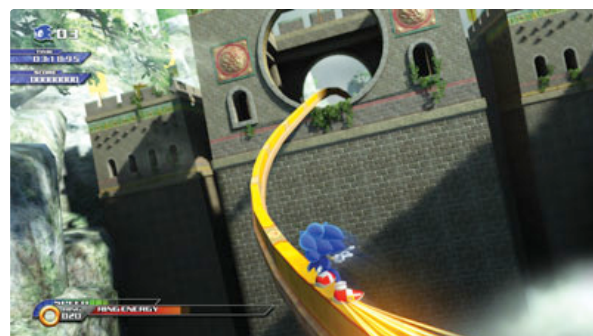
Sonic Unleashed

Sonic in charge

Sonic is unleashing a few demons in his latest adventure. When the sun goes down, Sonic the Werehog is set free to bring a new dimension to the series: a heavy dose of fist-to-face monster bashing. This nastier, beefier, slower Sonic, all werewolffed up, has the newly transformative power of elastic-like arms, which can not only grip the enemy in transition to a set of combos, but latch onto platforms and various environmental objects to yank Sonic to safety. Here you get a breather and a chance for a little

exploration to cut up the flip-side of the day-themed world.

In the daylight hours, Sonic Unleashed returns its focus to speed, where the blisteringly fast 2-D segments loop and wind Sonic toward a virtual 300 mph. Sounds good on paper, but it is definitely a kick seeing Sonic dash through levels that bring back the earlier days of 16-bit Sonic. Along with a boost move, Sonic can also further refine his movement at high speeds with quick-dash lane changes. **Brady Fiechter**



System: Wii | Dev: Gearbox | Pub: Sega | Avail: September 23

Samba de Amigo

While everyone else is busy playing "realistic" music games, you've got your sombrero on. There's a dried red stain of salsa on your chin. You're staring at a monkey, and you're ready to shake. The game you're playing is Samba de Amigo, and since it was only available for the Dreamcast (and in Japanese arcades), this is probably the first time you've ever played it.

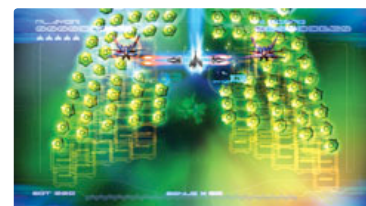
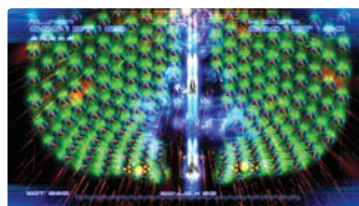
Thanks to Gearbox software, Sega's masterpiece Samba de Amigo is coming to the Wii. Crazy Latin music, maracas controllers, and Amigo—the monkey who's had a lot of flake—this is the game that looks at Rock Band, Guitar Hero, and the rest of them and squeaks: How 'bout a little fun?

Playing the game involves shaking the Wiimotes or Wiimotes/nunchucks at varying heights, in time with onscreen prompts. Different modes of play include Battle, Couple's Mode, a survival mode, Hustle mode (which throws in a lot of posing), and a slew of minigames. Your Miis will be onscreen to tell you how you're doing, and there's a leaderboard that will let you know how you're doing against real people. **Heather Campbell**

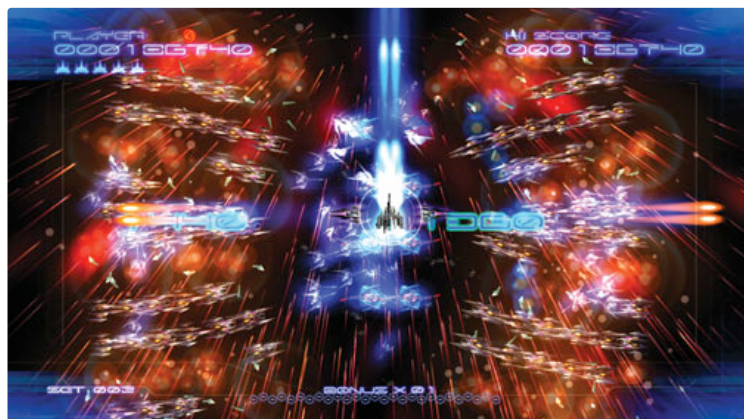


System: Xbox Live Arcade | Dev: Namco Bandai | Pub: Namco Bandai | Avail: TBA

Galaga Legions



If you're Namco Bandai, what do you do as an encore to the majesty that was Pac-Man Championship Edition? You dig into your extensive library and give another classic franchise a similar treatment; and in this case, it's my other favorite old-school Namco series, Galaga. Brought to us by the same folks who gave Pac-Man his rebirth, Galaga Legions promises to take the series in a whole new direction, shifting the focus to fast action and a combo-based scoring system. Also introduced in Legions are the "satellites," two helper ships whose position and direction of fire are controlled via the right analog stick. If it's anywhere near what we got in CE, Galaga Legions will be another jewel in the XBLA crown. **Eric L. Patterson**



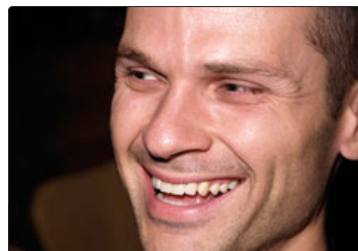


Dave Halverson
PUBLISHER

Modus Operandi: I don't take reviewing games lightly—no siree. I get deep into a game in accord with the audience the developer is aiming to gratify, and then review from that perspective with an eye on design, artistry, animation, attention to detail, physics, audio, and functionality.

Brain Drain: Now that the issue is put to bed...one sec. "Brady! Is the issue done!?" I can detox from back-to-back trade shows (I'm still trying to figure out why the Hard Rock sticks the bathroom sink in the middle of the room) and get back to writing my Death Jr. graphic novel (look for it wherever fine books are sold this Winter) and sorting out my October issue games. I've never seen a 4th quarter dotted with so many potentially epic games; honest.

Game of the Month: Castle Crashers



Brady Fiechter
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Modus Operandi: There is no checklist for reviewing a game. The best game feels right from the start, and the best game is not concerned with feature sets as much as how each component is handled. If the visual space is not compelling in some way, the gameplay better be so good that it's Tetris (which offers an incredibly interesting visual space).

Brain Drain: If *A Thousand Shark's Teeth* is My Brightest Diamond's last album, my musical soul will be a little less content. If Christopher Nolan refuses to return to complete his Batman vision for a third film, maybe they could hand it off to David Fincher. Now go play Metal Gear Solid 4 if you haven't already.

Game of the Month: Bionic Commando Rearmed



Greg Orlando
SENIOR EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Here's the way of it: a game can be fun, but not good, and good, but not fun. The two really are mutually exclusive; if it wasn't the case, Mutant League Football would score a 12 out of 10 and Silent Hill 2 would score a 4 out of 14. Thank god Play eliminated its scores. Also, Greg is counting the days until the installation of Reviewatron 4125, which will finally be able to suggest that fans of the genre should, in fact, like a particular game while all others should try before they buy—in 10 different languages!

Brain Drain: E3 is not dead, but rather sleeping. And listen to the bald man who says The Dark Knight is an excellent Joker movie but only a passable Batman film.

Game of the Month: Pandemic 2



Mike Griffin
PC EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I'm looking for convincing themes I can feel and considered polish I can respect, regardless of a game's scope or platform. I absolutely believe that games can be considered art, and a lot of great art requires a technical understanding of the canvas, instruments and stage. That's a balance I care about in a medium whose MO is interactivity. Interface is also very important to me, as it can crucially impede or compliment the flow of ideas that a game is attempting to communicate.

Brain Drain: 1942 had me craving a beautiful d-pad for retro homage games. The stock 360 and PS3 d-pads are inept. Capcom (with SSF II Turbo Remix imminent) should bust out a new edition of the Saturn-style 6-button controller. That d-pad was a true 2D gameplay companion.

Game of the Month: Multiwinia



Nick Des Barres
JAPAN EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Hideo Kojima may not agree with me, but I believe videogames can be art. Although I have been writing about them for 14 years, never have I felt comfortable assigning numerical scores; there exist no universal, pan-human criteria against one can judge works of art. The most a critic can aspire to is describing, with as much eloquence as he can muster, how the work in question makes him feel. That is my goal when I review a game.

Brain Drain: What's up with multiplatform this gen? The PS3 has been available for almost 2 years, yet much remains to complain about. Numerous games like CoD 4 and DiRT have proven that the Triple can handle anything its generational brother Xbox 360 can, but many publishers still persist in treating its owners like second class citizens.

Game of the Month: Soul Calibur IV



Casey Loe
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I couldn't be happier that we've done away with review scores. It's ridiculous to believe that there's some objective standard of quality that covers the opinions of every person who plays games. That said, I will miss dishing out the 3.5s, because a good reaming just isn't the same without some arbitrarily low score at the end.

Brain Drain: Someone please explain the unconditional love that GTAIV receives. The driving? Awesome. The graphics? Great. The story? Pretty good. But the dating sucks, the shooting sucks, and the fighting is a joke. It's a fine game overall, but I don't know that I've ever read a review that noted that the game ceases to be entertaining the second you get out of a car. Am I doing it wrong?

Game of the Month: Tales of Vesperia



ERIC L. PATTERSON
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I come from the angle that games can always be fixed and/or improved in some way, that games should be about making the player happy, not the developer, and if a game is multiplayer, it should be online, period. I'll forgive a game's flaws if it is an enjoyable experience, but I wish the small user-centered details weren't so often overlooked.

Brain Drain: I shouldn't have waited so long to finally get to Uncharted; man, what a great game. I no longer want stupid A.I. or action games without cover systems. Recent goodness: The Dark Knight, Retro Game Challenge and Rhythm Heaven coming to US, getting trophies in Super Stardust HD.

Game of the Month: Uncharted: Drake's Fortune



Heather Campbell
SENIOR EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Games are a journey, and should be covered like travel journalism. It's more important to know how a game affects you than to provide a list of options it features on its menu screen. The number of guns, the types of vehicles, the variety of locations—these are bullet points for the back of the box. I'll tell you if it made me feel.

Brain Drain: Comic-Con needs to be split into separate, unique events, or find a new venue. There should be a public video game event, a public sci-fi conference, a studio con, and a public comic conference. As it is now, there's simply not enough room to move, nor are there enough tickets for everyone who wants to go.

Game of the Month: Street Fighter IV

Soulcalibur IV

A tale of F-cups and G-strings, eternally retold

words Nick Des Barres

I wanted Soulcalibur IV to be a legendary masterpiece on par with Soul Edge and the original Soulcalibur. Instead, the franchise's seventh generation debut is just a plain old good game: better than the tepidly received Soulcalibur III, but lacking the robust one-player features that have come to be a series hallmark. Hardcore fans needn't worry that the core experience is in any way tarnished, but the majority of Soulcalibur's home-based audience might find themselves disappointed with the total package.

Soulcalibur IV's suite of modes may be atypically sparse, but few will complain about how the game looks. It's not an exaggeration to say the character models in SCIV are the best ever seen in a Japanese game, effortlessly toeing the line between Western photo-realism and Eastern hyper-stylization. Taut bodies are bathed in dreamy rim lights, the setting sun winks through folds in gauzy cloth, and exquisite self-shadows are cast by every strap and buckle. Animation is often not up to the same standard (SCIV still uses legacy motions, almost a decade old), and background geometry has clearly been de-emphasized in favor of the characters, but the overall effect is a wonder to behold.

If the graphics are the best thing about SCIV, gameplay is a close second. Namco's two fighting game series have consistently struck a balance between casual accessibility and the complexity that hardcore players demand; SCIV is no exception. Even simple button-mashing is fun, but much more fun can be had by taking the time to learn "Just Frame" moves (attacks that require precision timing) and "Guard Impacts" (a less severe implementation of Street Fighter III's parries). The most significant new gameplay feature is an armor-breaking system that does much to remedy Soulcalibur's long-standing problems with "turtling"—cause an opponent to defend enough, and you can force them into a condition called "Soul Crush." This opens them up to a "Critical Finish," which ends the round instantly.

Somewhat disappointing is that there are only two new "in-universe" characters. By now everyone knows about the three *Star Wars* refugees (Darth Vader on PS3, Yoda on 360, Starkiller from the upcoming *The Force Unleashed*)—impeccably crafted, but ultimately out of place. Far more interesting are the two new Project Soul-designed fighters, Hilde and Algol, who bring entirely new gameplay concepts to the series (Hilde dual-wields a lance and a short sword; Algol wields Soul Edge and Soulcalibur simultaneously).

SCIV is an excellent fighting game, yet the series has always been about more. The lone single-player mode, Tower of Souls, is presented with no story and consists simply of battles in which certain criteria must be met to proceed. Rewards come in the form of costume parts for use in the Character Creation mode, and gold with which to purchase additional parts, bonus characters, weapons, and static artwork. It's tempting to overlook the paucity of one-player content due to the incredible work that went into the Character Creation mode, which offers customization options above and beyond even the vast majority of MMORPGs. There are so many options available that almost any human character imaginable may be reasonably simulated, though movesets are curiously limited to clones of the standard characters. (SCIII's Character Creation offered 17 other weapon styles not linked to any character, but here they are absent. Perhaps the famously DLC-happy Namco intends to offer them as paid content at some point in the future.)

Soulcalibur IV presents a tricky dichotomy. In many ways, it is a dream come true for the seasoned fan—gorgeous visuals, arguably the best gameplay in the series, astonishing customization options, and the opportunity to play relatively lag-free online matches with duellists from around the world. It's a shame, then, that the elaborate one-player modes that made Project Soul famous have been so greatly reduced, and for that reason Soulcalibur IV will probably remain "fans only."

"It's not an exaggeration to say the character models in SCIV are the best ever seen in a Japanese game."



parting shot

Soulcalibur IV completely delivers on the series' continual promise of fantastic visuals and rock-solid gameplay, but fails to match past one-player-mode triumphs. Even so, it is a must-buy for the fan.



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Castle Crashers

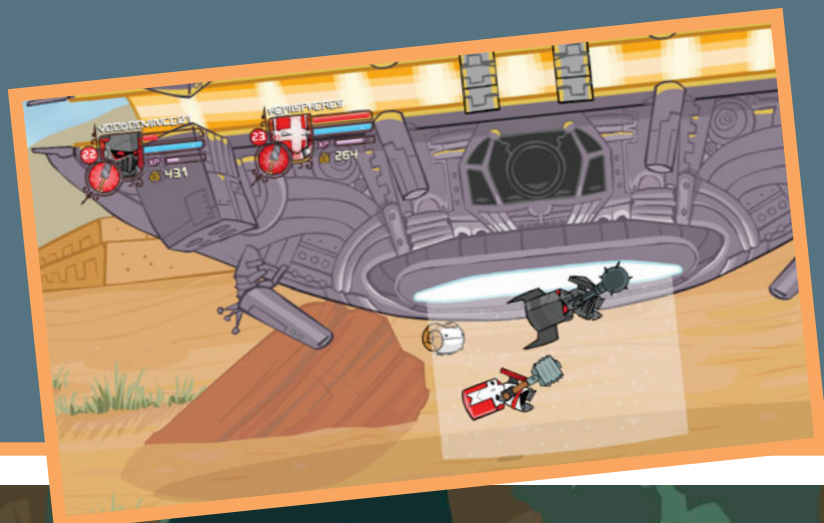
All hail The Behemoth

words Dave Halverson

If nothing else (although it generated category 5 internet buzz and went on to grace multiple consoles), the little Flash game that could, Alien Hominid, proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that indie gaming had more than a wing and a prayer's chance of becoming a bona-fide movement. A few short years later and The Behemoth's second game, Castle Crashers, doesn't need a console push to get its hooks into millions of potential marauders, thanks to the growing XBLA community—a by-product of the “next generation” so powerful that, in many ways, it eclipses the Xbox 360's brick-and-mortar accomplishments, which are meritorious in their own right.

Castle Crashers is the very definition of an indie juggernaut: A Flash website game developed by two collaborators (here's to you, Tom and Dan, wherever you are) that spawned a five-man studio (ditto, John) that's about to launch a second game so utterly engaging and addictive that it deserves a spot among the best games of its kind. When it comes to raw charisma, all of the big-budget luster and mega-tech that 3-D can muster can't lay a gauntlet on handmade 2-D animation of this caliber. Castle Crashers has more pure verve in its first level than a game like Halo has in its entire repertoire, and I believe Halo to be a fine FPA. Of course it's apples and oranges but hopefully you get what I'm driving at. If not, you will. Castle Crashers is a product of the religion that gaming once was, only heightened to a fever cartoon pitch unlike any other 2-D action game in existence. From the first frame, it pulses with hard-boiled cartoon vim and vigor. I'd liken it to an interactive cartoon, only cartoons don't look or animate nearly this good. The Behemoth have managed to breathe life into minuscule protagonists with more head than body

“Castle Crashers is the very definition of an indie juggernaut...”



"Castle Crashers is a product of the religion that gaming once was, only heightened to a fever cartoon pitch unlike any other 2-D action game in existence."

by immersing them in a world driven by the kind of soundtrack etched into existence by composers like Yuzo Koshiro (Ys I and II, Act Raiser) and Castlevania's Michiru Yamane before OSTs went to hell in a hand basket, and a heretofore unseen level of artistry in motion, raw action, and, if you can believe it, drama. Castle Crashers plays out like a pint-size mythological opera, running the gamut of emotions as The Behemoth interweave homages and potty humor seemingly unbeknownst to the their warmongering troupe.

Gameplay-wise, what you see isn't what you get, because I can't possibly show the game's range or vivacity (although I have captured some wicked screens, no?). Yes, the Castle Crashers (and assorted unlockable hellions) definitely beat on things, but there's many an "RPG" element to be had as well, by way of leveling-up attributes, constantly trading up to consecutively cooler weapons, a perfectly pitched balance between raw bludgeoning and magic, unlocking new characters, purchasing items in the game's many stores, discovering the many secrets hidden within, and what type of creature (from an ever burgeoning menagerie) you choose to accompany you in battle.

As an "arcade style" action game, Castle Crashers has more variety and range than I ever imagined, and a level of precision gameplay indicative of the games that defined the 16- and 32-bit eras costing far more to develop by teams many times the size. One minute you're rushing down a river on a shark's or alligator's back, fending off a gigantic buoyant feline with teeth the size of fence posts, and the next you're in a sweltering desert, digging for treasure, fending off masked assassins and squashing scorpions on a spitting camel. Castle Crashers makes up for every game where you thought to yourself, "What if..." Like what if at the end of said desert, you got sucked into a massive flying saucer and had to fight your way through an army of hostile Alien Hominid clones, only to discover the pilot taking a dump, causing him to initiate the self-destruct sequence, which you barely escape and then get blown back to the desert floor where you press on, infiltrate the palace, and finally make your way to the moment of truth...a volleyball game versus the palace guards using a beach ball, to the death! To quote the great Ricky Bobby, "That just happened!" Whether it's being funny, dramatic, crazy, or vile (bears do shit in the woods, by the way, along with deer and owls), Castle Crashers is superb on a level impervious to criticism. It does what it sets out



to do better than it has ever been done. Considering the size of the core game, which is surprisingly robust given the state of the games finale, the downloadable components to come, and the best multiplayer action in the known universe (if one player dies, another can perform chest compressions to bring him back—I love that), Castle Crashers is far and away the best downloadable game created to date and XBLA's first

original triple-A franchise. The fact that a game like Castle Crashers can thrive on grassroots marketing through conventions like Comic-Con and PAX, the web, and good ole word of mouth brings me solace in a time when the likes of Shigeru Miyamoto has turned his back on the very people that built this industry (50 dollars at a time, thank you very much) and a balance board for couch potatoes outsells Final Fantasy.

Pesky Hom-
inids...DIE!!



parting shot

What Mario was to NES and Sonic was to Genesis, Castle Crashers is to XBLA. If we "scored" games, I'd pin a big fat 10 on Castle Crashers, but since we don't (heh) and I've used up pretty much every expletive, I'll just say what I've always said and firmly believe: Side-scrolling games on this level of hardware, which can be made relatively quickly and at a comparatively modest fee, are the way forward. The proof is in the Castle.





PWN (*pôn*) v. To dominate or thoroughly defeat an opponent. Beyond conventional words like "own" and "owned" that require proper spelling. Individual typically owns OCZ Memory. For maximum pwnage, see OCZ Power Supplies. See also: *pwn n00bs*, *pwn0rz*.



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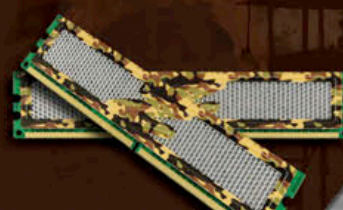
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Too Human

To err is human

words Dave Halverson

I'm a huge fan of action-RPGs (repetition and all), worship regularly at the altar of both Norse mythology and sci-fi, and have been riding the Silicon Knights bandwagon since Kain drained his first Nosgothian. So why am I not raising my complimentary Viking: Battle for Asgard tankard in Too Human's honor? How can an exceedingly multifaceted action-RPG with boundless replay value from the house of Kain and Eternal Darkness be anything but exalted? Allow me to elaborate.

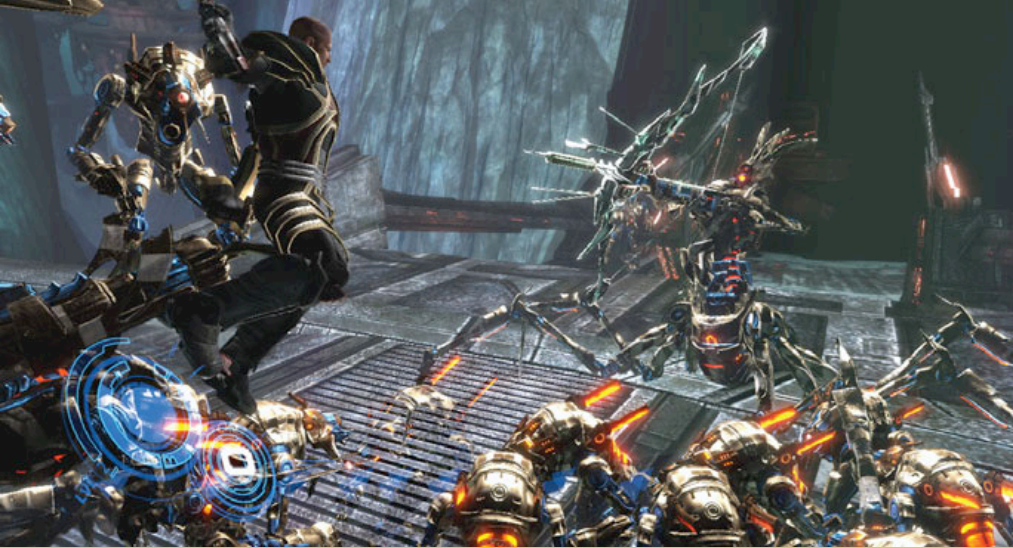
I'm right at home with the traditional city/hub-mission-repeat formula that Too Human is forged on, even when it's plodding, as long as I'm bequeathed a character that's as desirable to the eye as he or she is to control, and eye candy as good as the 360 can render. Lord Baldur, a gloomy military brute with unsightly head bumble and all the appeal of a lunch sack is, in my opinion, a poor excuse for a future disciple of Odin. His walking and running animation are typical GI-issue and his jump (which generates an ill-timed grunt) is patently unrefined. You can spin him like a top, mid-arc, yet they went to the trouble of giving him practical collision, to a degree at least. LB's stance and cadence conform nicely for the most part, although collision miscues abound. But details—details—who notices such things? If he looked like Thor, the sole character design befitting the game's mythology, I'd forgive him his trespasses...well, mostly. At least I

can cover Baldur's unsightly no-eyelids visage with a helm (eventually). The only reprieve from the likes of Lord Heimdall, who resembles a space-age game-show host, and Freya, the goddess of love, fertility, and prime-time sitcoms, is squinting. I mean no disrespect, I just don't like this character design. Midgard doesn't fare much better. Hollow, drab, extraneously designed and populated by pre-scripted drones, it's not what I envisioned Silicon Knight's advanced Norse empire would look or function like, based on the promise of cinematic grandeur and the power of the Xbox 360 (although I will concede that some of the cinematics are very well done). Freya, for example, sees Baldur off to battle and then makes like a pillar. Once she delivers her analogous dialogue, she stands affixed to the floor, as if somebody removed her battery. Is it too much to ask for her to exit, stage left? Elsewhere, while on a mission with Thor, Baldur can literally pass through him like a ghost (zero collision) and as they take turns carrying Mimir's talking head (which could be a cool gag), we never actually see the head. You can hear Mimir babbling, but his cyber noggin is neither on nor with either man, even as they pass it back and forth. Similar continuity-killing red herrings erode any grounds for suspension of disbelief. Much of the game's edifice comes across as little more than a means to an end. Even one of the game's hooks—Baldur's ability to warp between each stronghold's parallel NORN

Cyberspace—is as rudimentary a gameplay device as you'll ever come across. Locked door in the present world? See that twinkling well with the green A button above it? Warp, follow the path, stand on the conveniently located platform adjacent the corresponding obstruction, and press the requisite button to trigger the requisite power and destroy the obligatory barrier. Warp back and repeat as necessary. The stunning NORN lands are captivating when the cryptic trio of hags are present, but as switches, there's not enough gameplay to support the diversion, unless you consider discovering the odd Charm gameplay.

"Dying" is another head-scratcher. When Baldur is defeated, a curiously plump mecha-Valkyrie descends (s-l-o-w-l-y) and takes him off to Valhalla...for about five seconds, until he reappears in the same vicinity with all progress saved. There's a small statistical penalty attached, but why the lapse in gameplay? Just deduct it from my stats and spare me the interruption, or at least allow me to skip it. Invisible barriers also abound, a clear sign that time was not on Silicon Knights' side. Either that or such details weren't a priority, but I think they should be. The game's saving grace, or not, depending on your staying power, relies on the story, character building, and most of all, combat, so if you've come to tinker, protect humanity, and crush neo-ancient war machines, please press on.

Silicon Knights crack at a fresh melee system by way



"Overall, the combat is fast and satisfying and the levels themselves a mostly grandiose succession of neo-Gothic/industrial-inspired outposts."

of tethering combat to the left and right analog sticks (producing a kind of hyperkinetic game of connect the dots, only the dots die horribly) works surprisingly well. You may shake your head at first, but once you begin cultivating your Skill Tree, building your arsenal, and mastering Advanced Combat, the system definitely kicks into gear.

The balance between melee and ranged warfare is substantial, contingent on the class of warrior you select, with a Baldur to suit every taste. The Berserker and Champion, for instance, are melee gods, and therefore require skillful close-combat execution, ranging from basic maneuvers and one-button powers such as "Ruiners" to advanced air attacks and finishers. Air attacks (double-tapping RS forward sends the enemy skyward for Baldur to leap and strike) are among the most useful moves, but it's a shame they don't look as good as they work. The mythological mechs make a rigid ascent, followed by an equally inanimate Baldur, who often rises as if being lifted by a wire-fu harness. Given the frequency with which you'll perform the move (Baldur can perform some stunning mid-air kills) I think it could have used a bit more animation, especially later in the game when you're knocking enemies so high, it looks like Baldur is gliding to their level. Ranged combat, on the other hand, comes off with no such hitch, once you come to grips with the right analog stick *not* controlling the camera (which, other than your choice of proximity, is entirely cinematic to great effect) and occasionally snapping the camera back behind Baldur. Once a beam or shelling weapon is fixed on a target you can toggle appendages, taking out the legs or arms and then the core as necessary—good fun against the game's massive robot trolls. Close-proximity quick time events are effective, too, once you nail down the rhythm. Overall, the combat is fast and satisfying and the levels themselves a mostly grandiose succession of neo-Gothic/industrial-inspired outposts.

If only the action wasn't so repetitive. Some of the levels seem to go on forever, as wave after wave of the same robots drip from the ceiling to the point of near disbelief. It doesn't help matters that the "team" aspect of the game verges on useless. Leave one broken-down goblin alive and your infantry will unload on it for minutes on end, before you have to give it a tap to trigger the next wave of, hey! more robots! Baldur can imbue his flock with ferocity via the Skill Tree, but they're so not worth the effort. I really wish I could leave them behind. I'd rather go into battle with Mini Me then suffer through

another minute of agonizing dialogue. Is there no escaping the game industry's love affair with canned soldierspeak? Do Silicon Knights really think that future Norse warriors would spout crap like "Time to earn your food credits!" or "The bigger they are, the more I like killin' 'em!" or the always amusing "Gun, meet bad guy; bad guy, this is gun!" First of all, dickweed, they're robots, so I doubt they care, and secondly they're 50 yards off, so I doubt they can hear you. You're about to die anyway, provided you engage at all. Much of the time these nitwits just stand around as the battle rages. So, dizzying repetition, meet appalling present-day modern-warfare wisecracks! Meanwhile, Baldur speaks like he's doing Shakespeare. Crispin Freeman does a great job, but immersion is an uphill battle with the sci-fi and military elements at constant odds with each other. As for Too Human's much-touted item and skill management, they are indeed deep, but it's an acquired taste. Baldur picks up so much stuff (which conveniently pops out of spires and fallen robots) he'd need a U-Haul in a practical world, and all you really end up doing is selling off everything below your strongest current weapon and armor. The Skill Tree is another overly complex ritual. A heavily nuanced, intricate skill points system is a good idea (and this one is a doozie) but I have yet to get to the point where I can justify its excess. I'm only 20 hours into the game at this point (our review copy just arrived yesterday) so you'll have to check back with me online or in next month's issue. More than anything I really wish Too Human had a character-creation option. When I think future Norse warrior, I imagine one of Simon Bisley's hulking warlords in ornate futuristic Norse attire, not some uptight, stubble-headed soldier with a quarterback trot and perfunctory sci-fi body armor. The first rule of action-RPGs as far as I'm concerned is lead-character design. These games are repetitious by nature so it's imperative the player is invested in their instrument of destruction, and that he, she, or it possess the best animation and physics possible. The jump should have flowing animation throughout a maneuverable arc, and turning on the run should produce a natural leaning motion. There also needs to be animation for quick reversals.

In any case, Silicon Knights president Dennis Dyack has made it crystal clear that he's happy with how the game turned out, so there's obviously much more to come, although I prefer deft execution to longevity, so this should be interesting. There's a point early in the game where Baldur has to make a choice between accepting cybernetic implants (just



what I always wanted!) or retaining his humanity. I chose the cybernetics of course. If I'm going to stop a machine army from harvesting human body parts to become more human, what better way than to give 'em a dose of their own medicine. It's a wonderful bit of sci-fi at the heart of the story. I hope it takes me somewhere my grunts can't follow.

parting shot

The ham-fisted military overtones are a horrible contrast to the fantasy and sci-fi elements, and the jury is out on character design, outside of the robots, until further review. Until I complete the game I wouldn't feel comfortable rating it overall, but I hope my pre-review has been of some assistance. I know one thing, it's going to be a long haul. There's much here to discover. Maybe the Skill Tree has a way to make these grunts zip-it!

Tales of Vesperia

Has Tales found its Final Fantasy XII moment at last?

words Casey Loe

Amateur hour is officially over. It took three long years, but Japanese RPG developers with proven track records are finally releasing their next-gen games. No offense, *Feelplus* and *tr-Crescendo*—you got us through some dry times with your *Lost Odysseys* and *Eternal Sonatas*, and we're grateful. But now that we're seeing what veteran RPG developers can do with this new generation of hardware, there's simply no comparison. Namco Bandai's *Tales of Vesperia* is the first title up to the plate, and it's smacked the ball so far out of the park that it's hard to imagine even the trio of Square Enix titles on deck doing much better.

We'll start with the graphics. Yes, it's become something of a cliché to say it, but *Tales of Vesperia* really *does* look startling like a cartoon come to life. The cell-shaded characters are packed with tiny details and use every color in the Crayola box to pop off the screen. The game's polygonal environments have the artistry of paintings drawn for a Studio Ghibli film, but move with the depth of a true 3-D environment. Of course, these environments are a sham—the game uses fixed camera angles, so



"Vesperia succeeds in doing something that no RPG since Final Fantasy XII has managed to do successfully: feeling truly *epic*."



you can never look behind anything or zoom in to scrutinize details, but that's fine; the default angles have been carefully chosen to illustrate the beauty of each environment while making each area as straightforward to navigate as possible. In fact, Vesperia is a rare game where the default camera angles seem to be unfailingly perfect. There are never any abrupt camera shifts that leave you disoriented, and it's so easy to visualize where you are in dungeons that you'll never even mind the lack of an auto-map.

That same level of polish and expertise is on full display in Vesperia's battle system. When you encounter an on-field enemy, the battlefield loads within seconds, and the battles unfold at a beautifully smooth 60 fps. As in previous Tales games, you control a single character of your choice, dishing out pre-equipped special attacks and spells in real time, and using a variety of blocking and dodging actions to survive the attacks of your foes. The rest of your party is controlled by AI, although you can pause the game to switch up their routines or give them specific orders whenever you like. You can also divvy them up among friends to play two- to four-player offline co-op, but be forewarned: Your friends will grow restless between battles when they have absolutely nothing to do, and will end up raiding all the good stuff out of

The first original next-gen RPG shows its colors.

your fridge. (Thanks, assholes!)

At the start of the game, the battle system is almost identical to the one in Tales of the Abyss, but it doesn't stay that way for long. The game introduces new combat mechanics every few hours, and before you know it your in-game Battle Book will have swollen to well over 60 pages. The new mechanics are fairly complicated, but players are always free to take them or leave them. Casual players can keep on button-mashing, while those of a hardcore bent can build their entire combat strategies around the new mechanics—say, limiting each character to moves that strike horizontally in order to set up Fatal Strikes from that direction. Players who enjoy fighting at an advanced level will find plenty of reason to do so, since the game is full of optional superbosses, and using advanced techniques in ordinary battles will earn you ingredients for the game's elaborate synthesis system.

Tales of Vesperia also has a deep skill system, where characters learn new skills from weapons that they can later equip with a limited pool of skill points. Unlike many games that use similar systems, the most interesting skills can only be learned by a single character, so the more you learn, the more different the characters in your party become. For example, Judith can learn how to double-jump and perform

"Burst Artes" in midair, which perfectly compliment her assortment of leaping and diving special attacks. But while Judith is defying gravity with endless aerial juggles, Karol will be using slower, deadlier skills that allow him to inflict status conditions and charge up devastating single-hit attacks. Not all of the characters are fun to play, but the variation between them makes rotating your lead character a lot more appealing than it was in past Tales games.

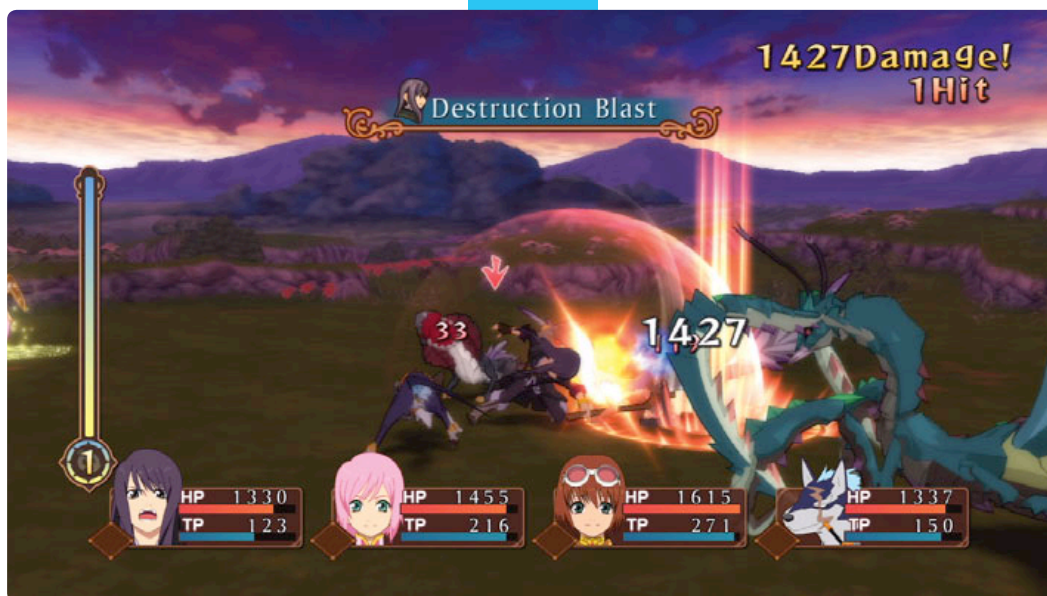
The one and only way in which Tales of Vesperia fails to improve upon its predecessors is its story. The central plot concerns a material called "blastia" that is widely used to protect human settlements from monster attacks, but comes from mysterious origins and may not be as benign as originally thought. It's a story you've seen before, but Vesperia takes it to such an insane level of technical detail that it ultimately becomes every bit as confusing as it is boring. At least it makes for a good drinking game—a sip whenever someone says "blastia," two sips whenever someone says "aer krene," and a full shot whenever you hear "Entelechia" or "apatheia." Just don't play it with real alcohol, or you'll be dead within 20 minutes.

Of course, Tales games have always relied more on the charms of their cast than the intricacies of their plot, but in that, too, Vesperia disappoints. Despite the generally strong voice acting and fully-voiced skit scenes (a first for a North American Tales release), none of the supporting characters manage to be anywhere near as much fun as Jade or Anise were in Tales of the Abyss. Maybe the problem is the frequently stilted dialogue, or maybe it's just that so many of the game's event scenes amount to nothing. For example, after nearly every quest in the first half of the game, your party spends five minutes saying their good-byes to each other only to—surprise!—find some reason to reunite 20 seconds later. You could make a fine drinking game out of that, too.

But while many of Vesperia's plotlines are generic Japanese RPG silliness, one tackles an annoying cliché of the genre in a way that adds a welcome streak of darkness to Vesperia's candy-colored world, and completely transforms main-character Yuri from a one-note hero to someone a whole lot more interesting. That story takes a while to develop, but it's well worth trudging through all the blastia stuff for.

Vesperia also succeeds in doing something that no RPG since Final Fantasy XII has managed to do successfully: feeling truly epic. Part of it is the game's large cast and volume of story, but most of it is the length of the game itself. Vesperia's world is huge, and it's a powerful experience when you first acquire a ship and can finally sail the length of it. The world is packed with interesting towns and dungeons, all of which feel distinctly different from one another, and the fast-moving quest is almost always taking you someplace new—you never backtrack for long, and never without a good reason. Vesperia should take well north of 60 hours to beat, and completists should find enough content to earn the "played for 100 Hours" achievement without having to leave their 360s on overnight.

If Tales of Vesperia can't take this underappreciated franchise to the next level, I can't imagine anything will.



parting shot

While Tales of Vesperia lacks some of the charm of its predecessors, its convergence of stunning visuals, epic length, and perfectly tuned gameplay make it the next-gen RPG to beat, and the breakthrough title that the Tales series has been waiting for.

Bionic Commando REARMED

Rearmed to the teeth

words Dave Halverson



"Silky smooth animation, beaming HD backgrounds all normal mapped and poppin', dynamic shadows, particle effects... somebody pinch me already."

Among the throngs of NES games many of us cut our teeth on in the late '80s, there was a clear dichotomy between the top-tier games and everything else. Games such as Blaster Master, Battletoads, The Legend of Zelda, Metroid, Ninja Gaiden, Mega Man 2, Castlevania III, Super Mario Bros. 3, Final Fantasy, Contra, Gradius, Faxanadu, Metal Gear, and, of course, Bionic Commando ruled the day. Bionic Commando existed within a microcosm of games built on a single hook, on which nearly the entire game relied. In a time before



physics, swinging around on a grappling arm was about as good as it got, and Nathan "Radd" Spencer was just too cool with his bright green suit, orange hair, and black shades. Yet of all the Capcom brands that laid their foundations pre-3-D, Bionic Commando remained the sole odd man out, until now. Twenty years later—Jesus, I'm still in front of the TV playing videogames—the day has finally arrived: 2-D Bionic Commando is back.

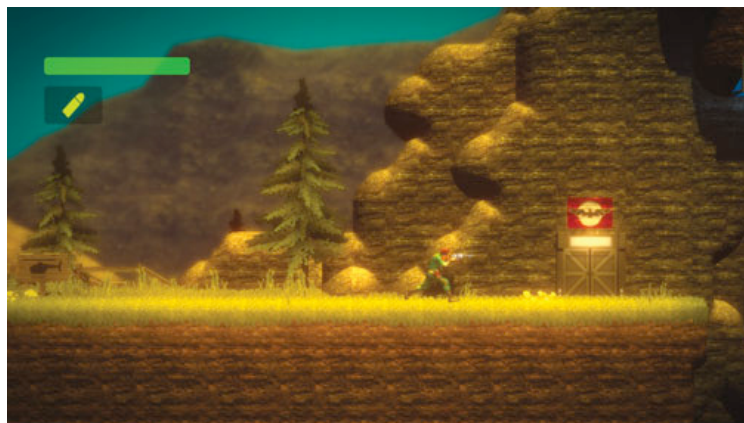
When I heard that Grin (who?) landed the coveted Bionic Commando project—Rearmed will be joined (literally) by its big 3-D Bionic Commando counterpart early next year—I didn't know what to expect, but it took all of two minutes to realize that Capcom had made the ideal choice. By folding select NES elements into the HD construct, Grin strike a pitch-perfect balance between the old and the new. At first I was a bit put off by the practical version of Nathan (I remember him as more of a comic book character), but within seconds he was the new guy. Side-scrolling games on next-gen systems are just too damn pretty. Silky smooth animation, beaming HD backgrounds all normal-mapped and poppin', dynamic shadows, particle effects...somebody pinch me already. Hold on...urgent incoming message. Damn Imperial Nazis—oops, I mean Badd's—don't they know when to quit?

Structure-wise, the game is just as we remember it, only ratcheted up to today's digital standards and

button-covered controllers (the NES pad had all of two) and housed within impeccably designed menu and option screens. The control is the picture of 2-D precision. Grin have mapped the controls with sheer genius, making diagonal firing of the arm the default (without pressing a direction), alleviating the frustration of hitting a diagonal in the middle of catch-and-release maneuvers, and in case you're rusty or need to dial in a certain maneuver (the arm is the definition of nuanced finesse controls), Grin added a series of neon-lit training rooms to the safe zones. The comm rooms are great, too—utterly gorgeous and preloaded with a cool cube/puzzle game to crack Killt's code and eavesdrop on the enemy to gain valuable intel about weapon locations and boss strategies. It's wise to crack every code; the info is almost always valuable, and Grin have a nice bit of fun at the Badd's expense to make up for the political correctness of ditching the Nazi reference and crazy ole Adolf as the end boss. I'm not sure how using Nazis as villains is wrong, but hey, every restaurant is Taco Bell.

parting shot 

Bionic Commando Rearmed is a triumph. I'm on bended knee Capcom; as soon as Grin wrap up the console versions, GIVE THEM STRIDER!





"I'm using the Wii remote's motion sensors and actually liking it! Call an exorcist!"



Wario Land Shake it!

Feel Good Inc.

words Dave Halverson

Before Miyamoto decided we could all dig a hole and crawl in (I'll be drilling mine in his Pikmin patch), a group of covert rebel operatives, code name GOOD-FEEL, who still believe games should be played by virile young men with multiple fetishes pertaining to virtual and/or plastic females and various forms of cartoon and/or simulated violence, secretly infiltrated Nintendo HQ and concocted Wario Land: Shake It!, working incognito after hours in the recently vacated "Games This Company Was Built On" wing. There's been no word on their whereabouts since switching out Wario Land: Shake It! with Nintendo's new Wii Virtual Vacuum press mailing, but rumor has it they're being held in Reggie Fils-Aimé's basement, forced to play-test Wii Virtual Dish Washing while listening to *The Best of Barry Manilow* and *Clay Aiken Sings the Chipmunks* on a loop. We'll have more, including the latest breaking news on reports that Yoshi tried to swallow Cammie Dunaway, as the story develops.

We urge all of our readers and anyone who sees this broadcast to show the brave men and women of GOOD-FEEL your support and appreciation. Don't let their sacrifice be in vain. If Wario Land: Shake It! actually sells, who knows? Perhaps they'll be set free to make another game for us cretins. Meanwhile, here's a recap of what's shaking in Shake It!, in case you missed my preview in last month's issue:

- OMG! A Production I.G anime with Wario in it! I've died and gone to heaven!
- I'm using the Wii remote's motion sensors and actually liking it! Call an exorcist!
- Side-scrolling will stop global warming, end the war, and give Britney her mojo back!
- Sweet baby Jesus! These bosses are the real thing! Incredible!

• Buy this game or burn in hell for all eternity!

With that out of the way, I must admit, shortly after writing my preview, I beat the Shake King (not easy!) and completed the game. I prayed on bended knee, holding a copy of Wario World with a Virtual Boy taped to my head running Wario Land, that another Continent would open, but alas, Wario Land: Shake It! is a short game made up of many short, albeit brilliant levels. The crux of the game is collecting as much treasure as you can while either eliminating or using each world's indigenous creatures to your advantage as you make your way to a level's end (which really isn't) utilizing the game's brilliant devices and play mechanics, and then plotting the perfect path back to the start in the allotted time (haul ass) using the ingenious level design and play mechanics that open up for your return trip. With any luck, you'll come away with one or more of each level's nonessential bonus tasks and enough loot to buy the next map from the sexy Captain Syrup. You're gonna want to go ahead and grab that new Heart

Container and a do-over as well.

Wario Land may be short—under 10 hours, depending on your skill level and tenacity—but replayability 'tis in full bloom. To finish the game 100 percent, you're looking at probably 15 to 20 hours. Nintendo snatched our copy back, so I'll have to get back to you on that, provided they don't take me away in a that weird Pokémon car.

parting shot

I will miss you, my fat little friend. I'll never forget that wonderful red adventure that burned a hole in my retinas, how that strange black jewel from Wario World brought out your eyes, or all the times we rammed Mario into oncoming traffic in Mario Kart 64. Those were some good times. But this isn't good-bye; I'm sure I'll see you in one of Nintendo's future titles, perhaps in a cameo as Princess Peach's pool boy in Mario Grill: Patty Flipping Challenge. I hear that spatula attachment is something special. Pee in the pool for me once for old time's sake, and here's to you, Gunpei, wherever you are.



Star Wars:

The Force Unleashed

Sure is dark in here

words Dave Halverson

I consider myself a Star Wars outsider, even though I also consider myself somewhat of a Star Wars fan. I had all the symptoms of Star Wars neurosis early on (*Star Wars* was an epiphany and *Empire* a religion—I wanted a Tauntaun), but by the time I saw my first Ewok it had passed, and if it hadn't, that surely would've done it. As far as I'm concerned, there hasn't been a great Star Wars movie since *Empire*. The next best thing was the *Clone Wars* animation, and, of course, all those videogames, although they've been as hit-and-miss as the films they're based on. It's a funny thing about Star Wars. The same guy who dresses up like a Wookiee and sleeps on the sidewalk for the next *Episode* premiere is the first one to tell you (in excruciating detail) how *VI*, *I*, and *II* insulted his intellect...right before he sits back down where the hobos pee. Mention *Phantom Menace* and half

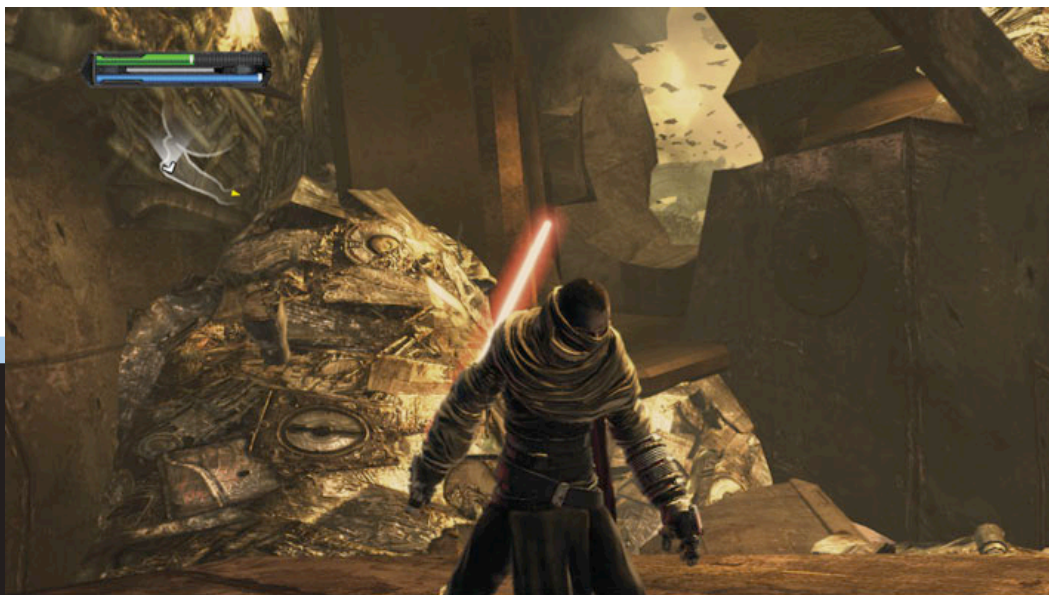
these nutters go into a spasmodic fit, culminating in a detailed plan on how they plan to kill Jar Jar Binks. Pssst...he isn't real. Meanwhile, *Phantom Menace* is the top-grossing film in the series, at nearly a billion dollars worldwide, all because they hated it so much, they had to see it 20 times to articulate why.

The same pretzel logic applies to Star Wars videogames, which is why ordinary humans can never be sure if a Star Wars game is popular because it's actually good, or because the Star Wars community has a bug up its butt. On that note, I, an ordinary non-lightsaber-owning sentient being, proclaim that not only is Star Wars: *The Force Unleashed* the best Star Wars game to date (by a mile), but also among the top 10 best movie games available on console, period.

The thing about *Force Unleashed* is that it's a great game first. Take Star Wars out of the equation



"...ordinary humans can never be sure if a Star Wars game is popular because it's actually good, or because the Star Wars community has a bug up its butt."



"The thing about Force Unleashed is that it's a great game first. Take Star Wars out of the equation and it's still triple-A."

to test your agility, combat, or quick time skills, all of which you'll need for the game's dramatic boss battles. There's a good bit of platforming, too, in concert with a myriad of well-devised environmental puzzles and quandaries—yet another venue for your Force Powers, using them to bend or manipulate the environments to your will. I'm not touching the story; in fact, avoid spoilers on this one at all costs. All I know is that this would make one incredible movie, if they could get Jar Jar to give in to the dark side.



and it's still triple-A. For my money, it's also the most cinematic and well-told game in the franchise. It's not long-winded like *Knights of the Old Republic* (which put me to sleep), but the cinemas are gorgeous and the story hits home like an AT-AT (I had to Google that, for the record). Beginning the game as Darth Vader, even though I wince every time I see that cutting-edge '70s space garb (is that an AM radio on his chest?), was pretty amazing. Christmas lights and all the power of the dark side made me wonder what the heck Luke's problem was. The dark side rules. But it's Vader's secret apprentice, Starkiller, who really seals the deal. Played by real-life actor Sam Witwer (I know, awkward, but it works; trust me), the likeness is uncanny (much more so on Xbox 360 and PS3, but to their credit, Krome shoehorned as much content into the Wii and PS2 versions as possible), but that's where anything remotely "photo-real" about our instrument of destruction ends. The design and animation teams at Lucas do a phenomenal job of making Starkiller look nothing like a real guy in a game and everything like a sinister demigod, and the animators bring it home with practical collision, cadence changes on slopes and stairs, fluid gradation from walk to run, haunting posture, a nimble jump, and superhuman animation as dramatic as the lightning that shoots

from his fingers. He's like, Strider-level cool. The art in the game is another series milestone. Starkiller's costumes simply couldn't be better; the character designs throughout are exceptional and the environments are simply not to be believed. There's some serious seventh-generation technology at work here.

If you're waiting for the other shoe to drop (I know I was), buckle up, because the gameplay holds up every step of the way. *Unleashed* is a thoroughbred action-adventure RPG, and the Force is definitely with you. Force Grip, Push, Lightning and Repulse can all be upgraded along with your lightsaber, which can also be customized using colored crystals found off the beaten path. The combat, both long range and close quarters, completely delivers. Force Power moves and lightsaber throws are easily targeted and wholly guilty pleasures, and there's a wealth of nuance at your disposal via dash and evasion maneuvers and brutal finishing moves. Better yet, the game never sits still: As you fortify Starkiller's attributes, the movesets adapt, creating a constant arc of more powerful and satisfying attacks. Even the levels cater to your every whim. There are plenty of lesser enemies to fling about and contort with ease, but there's always either a formidable opponent or massive creature waiting in the wings



parting shot

The best thing that ever happened to Star Wars is that the live-action movies ended. I'm more excited about *Clone Wars* (*Ahsoka!*) than I've been for any Star Wars film, and the *Unleashed* project is off to an amazing start. *Unleashed* is the best Star Wars game to date by a ridiculous margin, and you don't have to be a Star Wars sausage to love it.



Mario Super Sluggers

Let's go to the baseball game!

words Brady Fiechter



Wario is stuck on the roof of a small building, but a rescue attempt isn't possible until that veil of fog choking off the city's center is taken care of. It looks as though getting to the little jerk—even when in peril, Wario's still charmingly talking smack—might require breaking through some barrels and climbing a vine, so a trip to the jungle to search for Donkey Kong seems only logical; his invaluable skills are needed to complete the rescue.

There are around 40 character slots to fill in Mario Sluggers, and if you want them all, a thorough, pleasantly engaging search through Baseball Kingdom island is the only way to build the supreme team. This single-player challenge mode is mostly filled with rudimentary search tasks that connect to low-key minigames—complete a circuit to fix a park machine—and specific on-field events, like homerun and stealing contests. Coin earnings offer you the chance to buy very basic, slightly unnecessary power-ups for your team, like speed shoes and power bats, and a few new stadiums also go up for sale in the various shops.

There's not substantial weight behind Mario Super Sluggers' adventure mode, and it becomes a grind after a while—the character swapping is restrictive and prosaic—but I do like its inclusion and the excuse to discover and screw around with the various minigames while learning the ins and outs of all the players. In similar fashion to Mario Baseball for GameCube, every player carries a set of skill ratings and distinct characteristics, designed with just enough variation that someone looking to find a level of personalized mastery can appreciate. Winning in Mario Super Sluggers does require a

"This is a deeper and more satisfying sequel in some ways..."

gamer to know what he's doing, but, of course, a certain element of random chaos is there to make it all the more interesting (for those who like that sort of thing). Most of the stadiums contain some kind of treacherous hot point, from flaming lava to exploding shells, which are always waiting to screw with your perfect play, and calling on power-ups can change the tide of a game in an instant—making Mario Super Sluggers all the more enjoyable.

If you played and loved Mario Superstar Baseball, you pretty much know what you're getting into with Mario Super Sluggers and all its goofy, grade-A Nintendo touches and rock-solid mechanics. This is a deeper and more satisfying sequel in some ways, offering more possibilities with teamwork and online play. I could do without all the excessive, overwrought Wiimote shaking and yanking, but this is the Wii after all, and Mario Super Sluggers is as good a fit as anything before it.

parting shot

Don't expect leaps and bounds of change. Mario Super Sluggers is a strong sequel to Mario Superstar Baseball, with the obvious addition of motion control and new minigames and stadiums. It's a lot of fun but doesn't have the lasting appeal some might crave.



System: PlayStation 3 | Developer: SCEJ | Publisher: SCEA | Multi: None | ESRB: M | Available: Now

Siren: Blood Curse

Japanese horror show

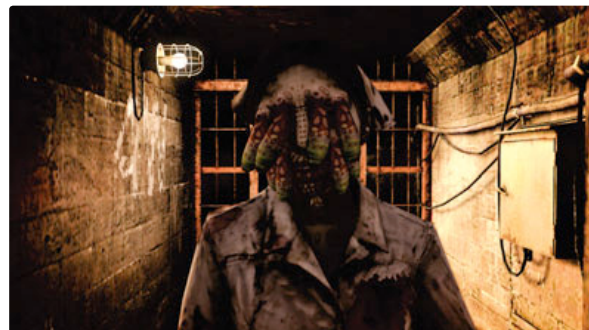
Siren: Blood Curse is a complete reboot of the original Siren, replacing its artsy, non-linear structure with simple episodic chapters, injecting more action into its stealth-oriented gameplay, and swapping its old cast of Japanese heroes with a bunch of visiting Americans. I was wary to see Siren lose the things that made it so unique, but by stripping out the distractions, the developers have tightened the focus on the chilling atmosphere and tense scenarios that are Siren's finest features. While Siren is far from a technical marvel, it uses the capabilities of the PS3 to move beyond the PS2 horror mainstays of thick fog and bloodstained textures, and pulls new forms of fright out of flashlights whose rich shadows make benign objects look fleetingly like murderous zombies, and split-screen perspectives that let you see yourself through the eyes of the demons chasing you.

Instead of offering a single focused quest in an open world, Siren puts you in the shoes of a character only long enough for them to accomplish a single objective before skipping onto someone else. Sometimes you'll be the guy with the gun, picking off Japanese shibito zombies from a

hundred yards away, and sometimes you'll be a defenseless child whose only options are fleeing, hiding, and using risky distractions. This omnibus structure suggests that Siren was originally intended to be released episodically, but Sony has chosen instead to release it all at once (for \$40) or in three 4-episode packs (\$15 each). That was a good call, since Siren's earlier chapters are disappointingly weak. But as the game moves from heavy-handed tutorials to more open-ended objectives, and the initially awkward controls grow more familiar, Siren improves rapidly. Not every episode is fun, but the bad ones are over quickly, and the good ones leave you hunched at the edge of your seat. For all its faults, Siren gets the horror right, and that's no easy task. **Casey Lee**

parting shot

If you give Siren a chance to recover from its poor first impression, its chilling environments and tense gameplay will hook you hard.



"For all its faults, Siren gets the horror right, and that's no easy task."

System: PlayStation 3, Xbox 360 | Developer: Backbone | Publisher: Capcom | Multi: 1-2 | ESRB: E | Available: Now

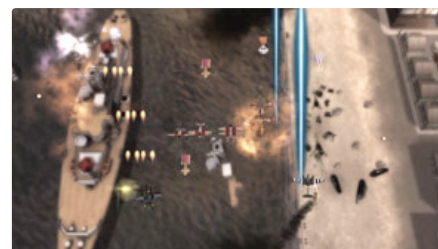
1942: Joint Strike

Bring a pair of aces

1942: Joint Strike is another retro revisit for XBLA and PSN, similar to the recent Commando redux, where you're not getting a touched-up classic or direct remake, but rather a modernized homage formed of heavy retro influences. Just like Commando 3, Backbone's Joint Strike sticks to a simple overhead shooter formula that instantly recalls its forefathers' gameplay.

1942: Joint Strike features WW2-era levels and enemies drawn in clean and crisp 3D detail, but old timers may experience pangs of nostalgia for the crunchy sprite madness of the classic 194X shooters. This is where I fantasize the scenario of someone going back in time to my childhood with an Xbox 360 or PS3 (and a HDTV) and showing me 1942: Joint Strike. Clearly I'd soil my little trousers. These modern remakes honor the core gameplay we wanted back then, now rendered in worlds with three dimensions and HD visuals and sound.

Of course all vertical shooters are not created equal. The bullet dance in Joint Strike isn't handled as deftly as true shooter masters like Treasure, but then Backbone has a more conservative point and bomb system here. The co-op Joint Strike mechanic for special attacks works well, though my partner and I ended up sticking with chain lightning. Just like Commando 3, Joint Strike is far superior (and



replayable) when enjoyed with a local or online co-op partner, and somewhat lonely and barren solo. And like the classic it's celebrating, Joint Strike is also a very short game—under an hour to complete. An enjoyable hour of nostalgic action that's cheaper than a couple of Starbucks beverages. **Mike Griffin**

parting shot

While it's somewhat sterile in presentation and very deliberate in execution, 1942: Joint Strike is another solid Capcom remake that goes beyond the usual retro revival. It has legs as a dependable co-op experience, but will fade quickly with solo players.

preview

System: DS Developer: Konami Publisher: Konami Avail: September

Time Hollow

A stitch in time may save nine, but it can erase your parents in the process.

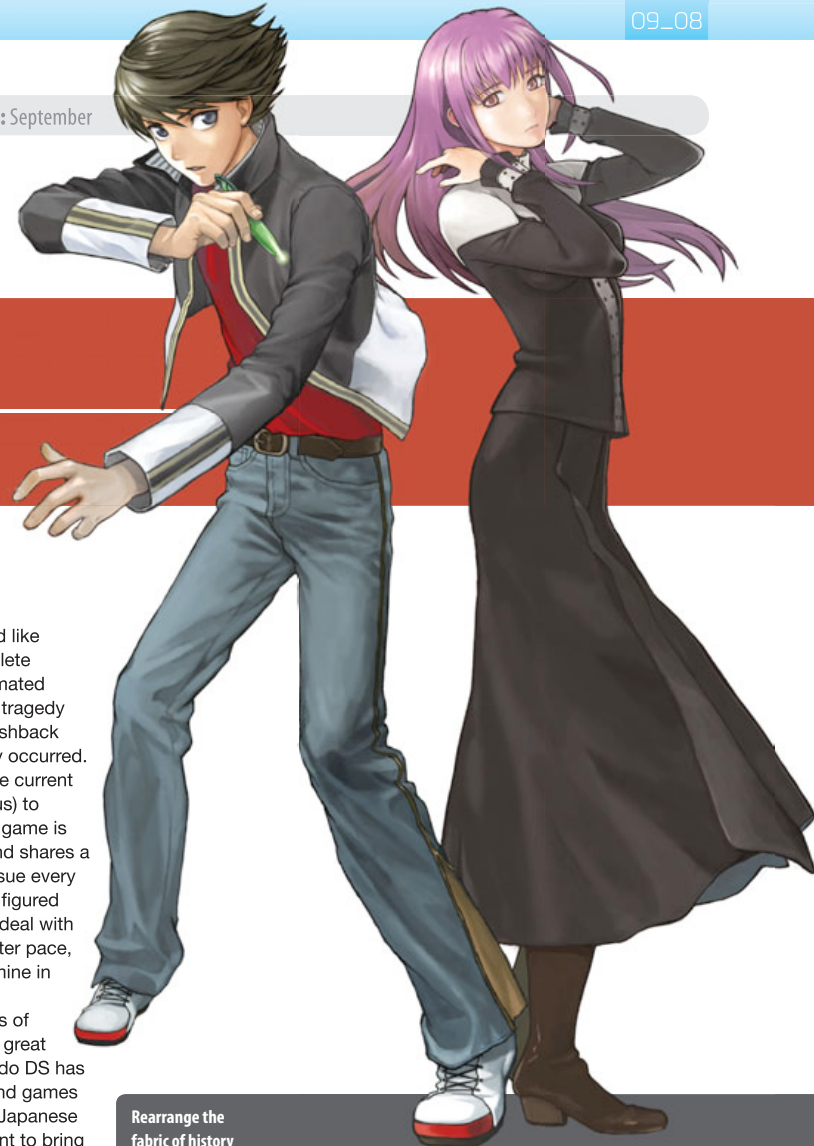
words Casey Loe

Of all Phoenix Wright's triumphs, the greatest may be his decisive victory the case of American Software Publishers vs. Text Adventure DS games. I'm sure we have his success to thank for Konami's surprising decision to localize Time Hollow, which uses Phoenix Wright-style tap-and-read gameplay to tell a time travel story so unique and complicated that it couldn't be done in any other genre.

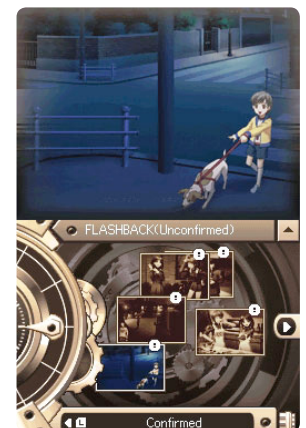
Early in the game, hero Ethan Kairos receives a "Hollow Pen" that can be used to draw small portals back to the recent past. He can reach through these portals to make minor changes in history, such as snatching a weapon that would later be used in a murder or stealing the keys from a motorcycle that is destined for a fatal collision. But whenever Ethan changes the past, he causes unexpected ramifications that require more changes to fix. Worse yet, Ethan doesn't seem to be the only person with this ability, and the consequences of someone else's meddling have written his own parents out of existence.

Time Hollow's six chapters are scripted like episodes of an animated TV series, complete with a theme-song opening and brief animated interludes. In each, Ethan must prevent a tragedy by investigating a series of mysterious flashback images to pin down when and where they occurred. He can then go to the same location in the current time and use his Hollow Pen (the DS stylus) to fish around in the past for a solution. The game is roughly structured like Phoenix Wright, and shares a lot of that series' flaws, like having to pursue every tiny detail of a situation even after you've figured out exactly what's happened and how to deal with it. But Time Hollow unfolds at a much faster pace, since there are only a few objects to examine in each area.

If Time Hollow can capture the success of Phoenix Wright and Hotel Dusk, expect a great many similar games to follow. The Nintendo DS has revived the text adventure in a big way, and games like this one prove that even mainstream Japanese developers have enough story-telling talent to bring gaming's oldest genre to life.



Rearrange the fabric of history and time.



"He can reach through these portals to make minor changes in history..."

preview

System: DS Developer: Square Enix Publisher: Square Enix Available: Winter 2008

Chrono Trigger

It's About Time.

words Heather Campbell

I'm going to admit something here that might make Square-Enix angry with me. Maybe Nintendo, too. I loaded an R4 into my DS a while ago, to see what all the buzz was about. I figure, it's my responsibility as a journalist to, uh, investigate these sorts of things. Anyway, I downloaded a single ROM (admittedly, of a game I already owned) and tested out some SNES emulation.

The one game I put into the system was Chrono Trigger.

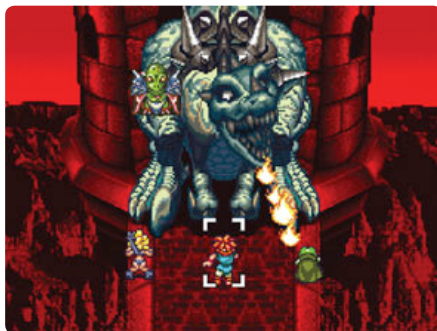
My verdict on the R4 enabled SNES emulation? It *sucked*. It was slow and unplayable. Total garbage. Discouraged, I tossed my R4 into a drawer. What was the point if I couldn't play *that* game? It seemed to be the only game missing from the Square Enix DS re-release library. Well, that and Secret of Mana. The other heavy, Final Fantasy VI, came to GBA a long time ago. But Chrono Trigger? Released for the SNES in 1995, reissued as a slow Playstation disc in 2001 ... and then nothing, for eight years.

So, when the pendulum began swinging on the Square-Enix.co.jp website before E3, accompanied by the ticking sound of a giant clock in some gargantuan, unseen echo-chamber, I was understandably excited. But, I have to ask: what took so long?

No matter. Here it is, and for those of you too young to remember, this is a very good, important game. An RPG where there are no random encounters (aside from the enemies that are laying in wait to attack the party), where battle takes place on the main map screen, and contains multiple, satisfying endings. Music by Yasunori Misuda and Nobuo Uematsu. Art by Dragonball (and Blue Dragon) designer Akira Toriyama. This is the game that was born of the golden days of Squaresoft. Classic titles like Chrono Trigger are the gamer's Bob Dylan, or our Beatles. The quality is difficult to compare, but the effect titles like this have had on our industry is scale-ably similar.

The plot is too far-reaching to summarize—and truth be told, if you aren't familiar with it by now, you owe it to yourself to experience it unspoiled. It involves time travel, a party of heroes gathered from all eras, and a spectacular villain from space. Chrono Trigger makes men cry, and women cheer.

For the DS update, a new dungeon has been



Look familiar? Oh the memories...

added to the title, and there's wireless co-op play. Additionally, the cutscenes drawn for the Playstation edition are going to be included. Some fans will balk that game remains a sprite-based, 2-D affair, but we owe it to ourselves to experience this one with its intentions intact.

This is it, gang. The DS game you have to get this winter. I won't get to set my hands on it again, because there's one hell of a Trigger fan in the office. Yeah, this review is going to Brady. You should have seen him light up.



"Released for the SNES in 1995, reissued as a slow Playstation disc in 2001 ... and then nothing, for eight years."

preview

System: NDS

Developer: Mistwalker, AQ Interactive

Publisher: Majesco Entertainment

Available: October 2008

Away: Shuffle Dungeon

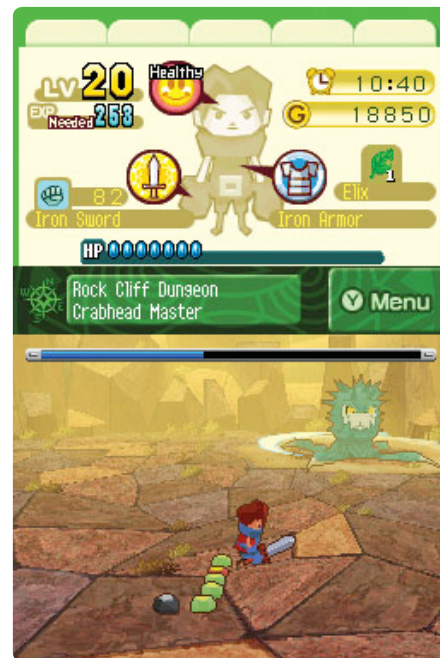
Unfortunately-named Sword is a young man with a life shared by many a video game hero: washed ashore in a far-off land, finding refuge in a nearby village, making googly eyes with a local cutie, all until one tragic day when an evil entity (known in this world as "AWAY") threatens the peace and tranquility of our hero and his new home.

Sword's adventures from there, however, are anything but typical. With the entire village sucked up by AWAY, he must trek through a series of strange dungeons to rescue his friends and help rebuild the town. Here in lies the beauty of what Mistwalker and AQ Interactive have put together: instead of randomly generating each floor in this dungeon crawler, the pieces of the floors "shuffle" through various possibilities, making progression never the same path twice. There are always two sections visible—one each on the top and bottom DS screens—and at different times, one of those two pieces will spin like a slot machine, changing itself to a new section of the dungeon. Not only will players have to navigate back and forth between the two until the exit finally arrives, but they'll also have to be careful in doing so, as being on a screen

when it starts to shuffle means an instant kick back to the beginning.

Away: Shuffle Dungeon looks to craft an intriguing game upon a unique premise that plays to the strengths of Nintendo's handheld. Definitely keep your eyes on this one. **Eric L. Patterson**

Consumerism is alive and well.



preview

System: NDS

Developer: Square Enix/ArtePiazza

Publisher: Square Enix

Available: September 16, 2008

Dragon Quest IV: Chapters of the Chosen

Another classic RPG graced with new, three-dimensional graphics? Old-school gameplay and first-person menu-based fight-screens? Do you really need to look at the box to know that this is Square Enix?

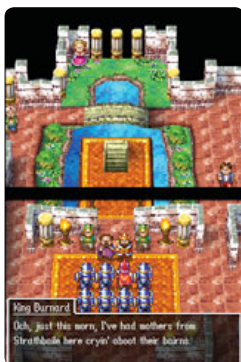
Dragon Quest IV comes to the DS this fall with a fresh coat of polygon paint, a town-sharing wireless mode (develop a town and swap items with friends), and all the graceful monster designs that, well, really haven't changed in the last fifteen years. The main hook of DQIV is the way the story is divided into five different chapters. Each arc has a main character that is introduced individually, solves a section of the story, and then unties with the other main protagonists for the final chapter. The chapters have their own titles (Like Ragnar McRyan and the Case of the Missing Children, or Alena and the Journey to the Tourney), and focus on the backstory of each of the heroes.

Very little has been added to the game for the DS, other than the graphical overhaul. Which, given the fetishistic attention to old-school detail that Dragon Quest games are known for, is probably a good thing. The game is a classic-classic; an old-school game in a series obsessed with old school-ish-ness. The adventuring that doesn't seem to have aged at all, but that's probably because Dragon Quest is nearly a living relic, churning out the charms of old games regardless of the roman numeral suffixed beside the title.

Best part of this game? That theme. The Dragon Quest theme should be played every time you walk outside. And guess what? Now, you can. **Heather Campbell**

"The main hook of DQIV is the way the story is divided into five different chapters."

Respect to the old-school warriors.



preview

System: PSP Developer: Bend Studio Publisher: Sony Available: Spring 2009

Resistance: Retribution



Nathan Hale, star of the PS3's first-person shooter Resistance: Fall of Man, sincerely regrets that he has but one life to give to his country. That's why James Grayson, a British soldier will take center stage in the handheld Resistance: Retribution.

Retribution, a third-person shooter, is set in the same universe as Fall of Man. The alien chimera, who've assaulted Earth in a hellish version of the 1940s and '50s, serve as the game's persistent

enemies, and it's up to the revenge-minded Grayson to blast them until the end credits run. Bend Studios plans new weapons in the form of a human/alien hybrid sniper rifle, two new enemy types dubbed "hag" and "clover," and five modes for the game's ad hoc multiplayer experience.

Bend has firmly set the events of Retribution between Fall of Man and its PS3-bound sequel. There's no word if Hale will make a guest appearance in Retribution. Time will indeed tell. **Greg Orlando**



"Retribution, a third-person shooter, is set in the same universe as Fall of Man."

preview

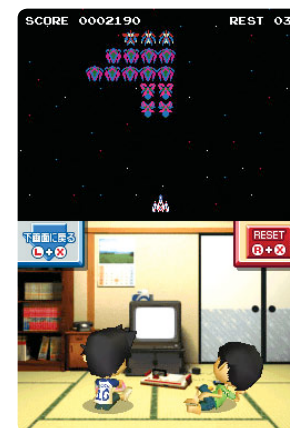
System: DS Developer: Namco Bandai Publisher: XSEED Avail: 2008

Retro Game Challenge

Game Center CX was (a) a quirky DS release based around a Japanese TV show, (b) an homage to the nostalgic days of 8-bit gaming, and (c) a game I never, ever expected to see released in the US.

Thankfully, this world still has a few surprises in store for me, as XSEED is set to bring us the game later this year as Retro Game Challenge. Presented within are a collection of games made to look and sound straight from the era of the NES—from platformers, to racing games, to even a full-on RPG—along with fully crafted game instruction booklets, virtual "vintage" gaming mags (titled "Game Fan Magazine" no less), and other retro-inspired elements.

Eric L. Patterson



preview

System: NDS Dev: Nippon Ichi Software Pub: NIS America Avail: Sept 2008

Rhapsody -A Musical Adventure-

When the original Rhapsody dared to combine the worlds of Japanese RPGs and Broadway musicals, the result sounded like something so wacky that it had to be experienced. Unfortunately, I never got the chance to get my hands on it—until now. Cornet and friends return in Rhapsody ~A Musical Adventure~ for the DS, which promises to mix all of the song-filled silliness of the original game with some new features that were added specifically for this version. And, yes, the (Japanese-language) vocal songs are being stuffed into a tiny DS cart. Ah, technology. **Eric L. Patterson**



We now interrupt this magazine for a special report

E3 2008 REPORT

If it bleeds, we can kill it.

E3 EXPIRED
May 2004

The editors of **play** reflect on the events of E3 2008.



In the past, E3 has been accused of being a big bloated excuse to spend too much money and get everyone in the industry together to feel like rock stars and party it up. This year, it was accused of sucking, offending, losing touch—pretty much needing to go away. Next year will certainly find a happy medium, especially when the executives of these

massive game companies were also the ones joining the fray in vocally denigrating what was once the industry's premiere showcase for the year in games.

Whatever E3 was or will be, this year still had plenty of delicious gaming grist to mull over. It's over, but our personal mulling is far from over, so without further ado, here are our motley thoughts on what's going on in 2008.

Confused In The Post-E3 World

Genuine Greg Orlando

(40% Snack Treat, 66% Je Ne Sais Quoi)

Sept '08
BEST BY



As the game industry flourishes, many suggest its primary showcase is dying a slow, agonizing death. This year's Electronic Entertainment Expo was, by all reports, a limping, halfhearted affair, the high point of which was not found in the Los Angeles Convention Center, but on stage as the aging rockers in The Who played the Rock Band 2 party.

A party, I am sad to note, that I missed. Because truth in advertising demands I say that I also missed out on E3 itself. And while I'm not sad at missing the event, I'm wishing for additional flexibility to kick myself for missing Masters Daltrey and Townshend, now some 40-odd years away from the teenage wasteland, performing live.

If indeed the pundits are correct, if indeed E3 is dying, then this is a good time to talk about ... life. And creation. It's far easier to destroy than to build, but the lesson I can take from this year's E3 is that I'm inexorably drawn to games where the emphasis is on building and creation.

There's plenty to say about destruction, mind you. I'm eagerly anticipating the opportunity to shoot zombies in Valve/Electronic Arts' Left 4 Dead and Capcom's Resident Evil. Zombies are the video game equivalent of gold, and should be mined at every opportunity. Gears of War 2 and Dead Space will serve nicely to satisfy my need to blast things in a science fiction-heavy setting.

Aside from the overly destructive games, I'm also looking forward to alternately going blocky with Lego Batman: The Videogame pitting Superman vs. The Joker when Mortal Kombat meets the DC Universe, and exploring the odd world of Animal Crossing (a game that once ate my life) on Wii.

I'm far more interested in games such as Spore, a game that allows players to create a galaxy-spanning society starting with a cleverly designed single-cell organism. Already, people are building a host of great whatsits with Spore's Creature Creator program; the already released demo program hints at the game's tremendous flexibility. Players are able to design exactly the creature they want, right down to a penis-themed monstrosity that should be burned with real and electronic fire before it ever should make it onto anyone's monitor. Go, play, explore, Spore says. Show me what you can build. Have fun.

Fable 2's grand appeal lies in its hero customization. Peter Molyneux is letting you create your own hero, male or female. Your actions shape how he's perceived by others and, this time around, the promise will be kept: what you do in the beginning of the game will cause ripples in the world. Good deeds done as a child will shape the world. Bad deeds will transform it for the worse.

A revamped morality system allows for more subtle plays on right and wrong. Molyneux suggests that being cruel is, sometimes, a kindness. Moreover, a hero's choice to perform good deeds may oftentimes lead to a life of sacrifice. These, then, are intriguing notions.

The more I see of Little Big Planet, the less I want to see of it until its release. Whimsically brilliant, Planet gives players the tools to create their own platforming adventures. Surprisingly clever levels

can be created, decorated, filled with traps and enemies, run through by cute little burlap sack men and women, refined, shared, and treasured by a mass audience. This game will run long and hard on the creativity of its players, and it's the rarest of rarities in the videogame industry: a title that can't be released soon enough.

It seems trite to say it, but it may well be true what the Book of Common Prayer says: "In the midst of death, we are in life."

It would be nice, too, if E3 stuck around another year. The Who, too.

These smiling faces know not the horror that awaits them at the hands of bored gamers.



Spotlight Game: LittleBigPlanet

LittleBigPlanet gives you the tools, steps back, and says, simply: play. What happens next, guided by your creativity, will be something to see.

E3 2008

I Did It My Way

100% Fresh Dave Halverson
(90% Publisher, 10% official
Play E3 couch correspondent)



BEST BY
Sept '08

Part 1: Which is more interesting, talking about E3 or E3?

Like most members of the press I have both fond and not so fond memories of E3; the farther back you go the better the memories get. I'm not surprised or saddened by E3's imminent demise. In fact, I'd like to propose a toast to it becoming toast, because if you think about it E3's decline runs parallel to the industry's growth. Before we had all this amazing new technology that connects us 24-7 we needed E3 because our readers needed E3. E3 issues were the most exciting of the year by far, packed with new,

E3 2000: One small step for Microsoft



The Xbox launches with two of the strongest launch window titles in history. Elsewhere a tree falls in a forest. Reaction is strangely identical.

Kelly O': Microsoft? Come in...over
Microsoft: We read you loud and clear, over
Kelly: So are we ready to launch this baby or what? over
Microsoft: Who are you again?

never-before-seen games and announcements. It was like Christmas. As the internet grew and the industry blossomed, those surprises became a few reveals, and then stopped altogether, because gaming outgrew the format. We all needed E3 less and less—press, consumers, publishers—but more and more people kept piling on, until it became unbearable. By my calculation we outgrew E3 about 4 years ago. Gaming is too big and moves too fast for an annual trade show. When we can share game clips in real time, contact each other 24-7 and access the internet and email on our phones why do we need to pile into an arena to look at games we've already seen? When a game

company essentially shuts down, interrupts development and sends its people to LA to show us a game, unless it's a matter of national security you have to start wondering if we're all just working too hard. I wonder if everyone does E3 because everyone else is doing E3? Or maybe it's the game industry's version of Spring Break. If so, can we at least go back to Vegas?

Part2: E3 made Easy!

I couldn't attend this year's fiesta because I was busy planning our Comic-Con presentation, a trade show where we can set up shop, interact with our readers and find new ones while enjoying the coastline and cool breezes of San Diego. You know, Publisher stuff. I can't miss an E3 though, so I decided to tough it out and multi-task...

Watching E3 on my PC, from the keynotes to every game demo (full screen!) and ogling every piece of art and screenshots in air-conditioned luxury, this was the best E3 I've had since it didn't suck. So, since there's no way I'm going back to bake in LA, here's my Top 5 E3 memories...

- 1) The final countdown in the Sega self-destruct sequence that began with STI (Sega Technical Institute) and stumbled into the 32X finally went boom at E3 1995. Sega announced the premature emancipation of the Saturn (to beat Sony's PlayStation to market) and sent it limping into battle light on games and \$100 top heavy.
- 2) The first few years watching Sony's master plan unfold, beating whatever competition they didn't eliminate.
- 3) Nintendo, Nintendo, Nintendo: I remember playing Super Mario 64 and Wave Race at E3 like it was yesterday. The Nintendo 64 was the most exciting launch of one of the best systems ever. I also completely lost it over the Virtual Boy too. Still do.
- 4) The rise and fall of the Atari Jaguar. In the back of our minds we knew it was destined to crash & burn but Atari's last gasp was full of E3 pipe dreams like the Jaguar VR.
- 5) The launch of the Xbox. The system everyone predicted would be as frigid as a PC was like the Dreamcast2 we never had.

And finally:

My Personal Top 10 games of E3 2008 (of which I had seen or played 9)

- Tomb Raider: Underworld *Seen it—did a cover
- Mirror's Edge *Seen it—did a cover
- Fable 2 *Saw it at GDC with Peter M. and maybe 10 people. Awesome.
- Banjo Kazooie Nuts & Bolts *Seen it—love it
- Bionic Commando *Seen it—Also played it at Comic-Con for an hour—no line
- Sonic Unleashed *Seen it—did a cover
- Darksiders: Wrath of War *Seen it—did a cover.
- Joe Mad signed issues at our Comic-Con booth
- Castle Crashers *Seen it—it came FedEx while everyone was at E3
- Ratchet & Clank Future QfB *I actually hadn't seen it! But I could have.
- Castlevania Order of Ecclesiast *Seen it—playing it now in fact...

...I rest my case

Post 2000 E3 highpoint: Kameo to the rescue!



Lara pulls off the win (duh).



Nintendo

At E3 2008:

Even Their Apologies Miss The Point

Fresh-Squeezed Casey Loe
(32% Country, 64% Rock n' Roll)



BEST BY
Sept '08

Nintendo had a disastrous showing at E3. They unveiled little of interest to serious gamers and didn't even announce localizations of obvious titles like Fatal Frame IV. The only sop given to lifelong Nintendo fans was the vague confirmation that new Mario, Zelda, and Pikmin games were in development, and a few copies of the DS game Rhythm Heaven on the show floor.

Of course, Nintendo neglecting the hardcore in favor of the casual isn't anything new. But this time they got called on it. The reaction from online fans

and the enthusiast media was universally negative, and even mainstream media sources like the New York Times and Associated Press gave more coverage to the controversy than Nintendo's actual line-up. This sort of furor can only bring positive change; as Patton famously said, "success is how high you bounce when you hit rock bottom."

But it isn't clear that the bounce will be going in the right direction. The first warning sign was when analyst Michael Pachter summarized the controversy by saying "hardcore gamers were disappointed at the lack of a major Mario or Zelda game announcement." A few days later, Nintendo President Satoru Iwata apologized, saying to Forbes, "We are sorry about [the E3] media briefings, specifically for those who were expecting to see Nintendo show something about Super Mario or Legend of Zelda." Shigeru Miyamoto tried to explain away the controversy by telling the Daily Telegraph that it takes years to develop—you guessed it—Mario and Zelda games.

Who the hell said anything about Mario and Zelda? We just had a bunch of Mario and Zelda games! Is that all they think hardcore gamers want? Sure, Pikmin is welcome news, but what about Kid Icarus, and Metroid, and Fire Emblem, and the dozens of good Japanese DS and Wii games Nintendo refuses to localize? What about making new franchises for hardcore gamers, built around the capabilities of the Wii remote or the DS touch screen? What about new games from Retro or Treasure or Silicon Knights? What about developing a single traditional videogame

In lieu of talking about the dreadful event know as E3 2008, Brady asked that we share our feelings on how we think the video game industry stands as we enter the second half of this year.

Well, dear reader, do you want to know the truth? The truth is, I don't know how I feel. Or, maybe I do know: I feel confused.

Confused

In The Post-E3 World

Eric L. Patterson Extract
(92% Heaven, 0% Rhythm)

BEST BY
Sept '08



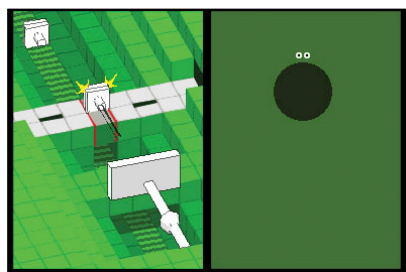
I'm confused about my place in the wild world of Wii. Let's be honest: the console was never really meant for me, as somebody who isn't a serious fan of Nintendo's A-list titles beyond Metroid. (If I love a Nintendo game, it's usually their small, quirky stuff.) Yet having fallen hard for what has arguably become the best gaming platform this generation, the DS, I **want** to enjoy the Wii more than I do. Looking at what's coming down the line for the console, however, the divide between us has never felt greater; it also doesn't help that for us Americans, my favorite piece of the Wii puzzle—the Virtual Arcade—has become a shell of its former self week after week to make way for WiiWare games I have no space for anyhow.

I'm confused about exactly what's going on with

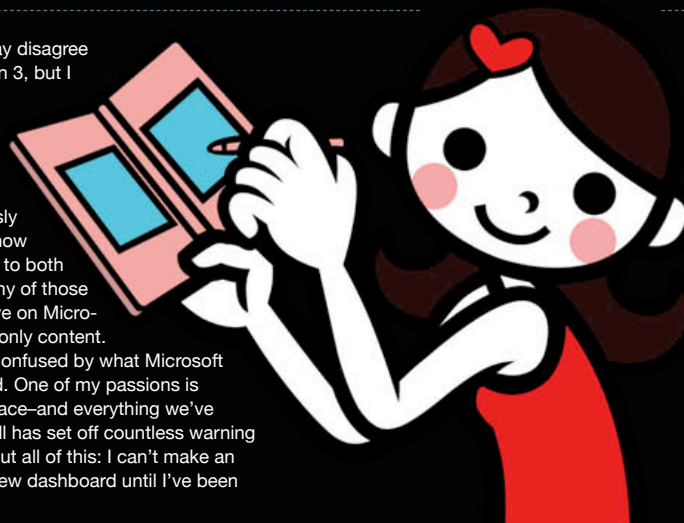
Sony. From a "professional" point of view, I may disagree with some of their strategies for the PlayStation 3, but I do understand them. From a consumer's point of view, however, I'm confused by the way it still seems like they're content to let Microsoft walk all over them, as the Xbox 360 continues to one-up the PS3 at nearly every turn. It isn't even about the 360 getting what were previously considered "PlayStation exclusives" (though, how Final Fantasy XIII was allowed to make its way to both systems I'll never know); it's about how so many of those upcoming third-party games are more attractive on Microsoft's hardware, from timed exclusivity to 360-only content.

Speaking of the Xbox 360, I'm particularly confused by what Microsoft has shown us in regards to the new dashboard. One of my passions is design—especially when it comes to user interface—and everything we've been shown so far as to what awaits us this fall has set off countless warning sirens in my head. Now, I'm being realistic about all of this: I can't make an honest judgement on the good or bad of the new dashboard until I've been able to spend some quality time putting it to practice. Even so, the designer in me is horrified by many of the choices Microsoft has made, not to mention extremely hesitant at the idea of such a radical re-design of a key element of the console happening so deep into its life cycle.

I can, however, say with confidence that there is some top-notch gaming still to come this year... especially with a certain gift Atlas has for us just in time for the holidays.



This... beat... is noooooon-stop!



Spotlight Game: Rhythm Heaven

One of the best games to get stuck in Japan—Nintendo's rhythmic mini-game collection Rhythm Heaven—is getting a sequel for the DS, and thank the gods in heaven, we won't be missing out this time around. Not even a mention in your press briefing, NoA? For shame.

for Nintendo's own WiiWare service? Don't get me wrong—I'd be happy to have more Mario and Zelda, but that isn't what Nintendo's staunchest fans were clamoring for.

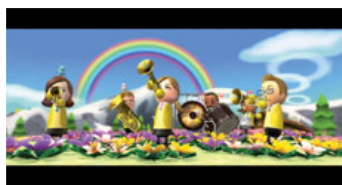
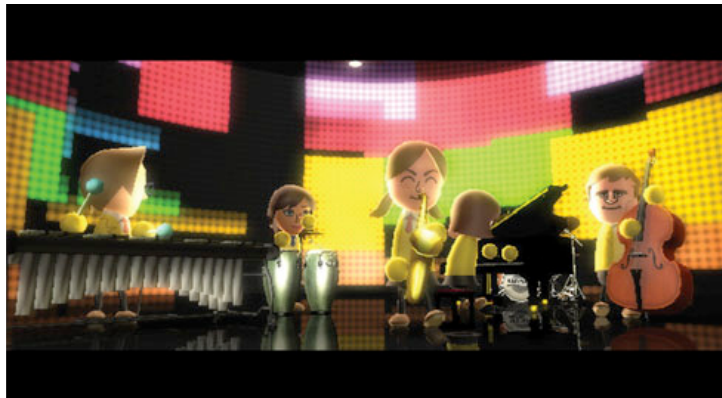
Nintendo clearly has an audience willing to pay for more hardcore games, so their reluctance to publish them suggests that they find the games themselves to be damaging to their new image. They may have a point—Apple captured the mainstream market by cutting back on product lines, so that each new Apple release could be an event. But Apple never abandoned their core market; their products typically offer just as many features for technophiles as they do for technophobes. Nintendo themselves pulled this off beautifully with Super Mario Galaxy, but not every genre can be made so accessible to mainstream audiences.

Nintendo may be doing great with casual consumers, but there's no point winning over people who buy two games a year if it costs you the one who buy ten. Nintendo needs to spin off a hardcore gaming division in the same way they spun off the Pokémon Company. Then they'd have a subsidiary to localize all their hardcore Japanese games, invest money in smaller projects like WiiWare games, and produce occasional high-budget hardcore title in franchises like Metroid and Eternal Darkness that will never be—and should never be—casual-gamer friendly. All without diluting the Nintendo brand.

Please Nintendo, let us give you money for making games again.

Spotlight Game: Wii Music

With Wii Music, Nintendo is taking accessibility to the ultimate extreme. You can't even lose—you just choose a track to play and an instrument to emulate, and wave your Wiimote however you please. Considering concepts like winning and skill are present in even the simplest of games, is there really a demand for something *this* casual? Does Nintendo once again know something we don't, or have they finally overshot the mark?



Orchestra-in-a-Field Hero

E3 had few surprises outside of the Big Announcement (that, of course, being that Netflix is porting their entire catalogue to the 360), but there were still plenty of games to spoon up and digest. I could—and would like to—dedicate all this space to Street Fighter IV, but I think we all know by now that it's The Best Game of the First Half of 2008 ... and possibly the game of the year.

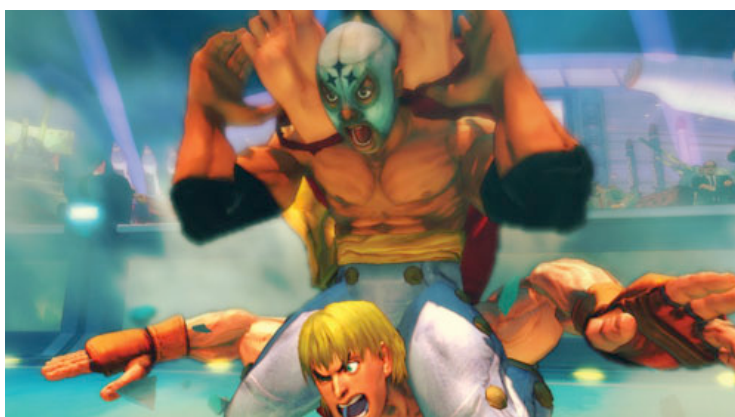
My favorite under-covered title would have to be the unnamed DS platformer by Atari currently known as Felicity and Felix. Inspired by Japanese platformers (and featuring sprites that hint at Cave Story), the DS title concerns itself with two young protagonists who are trying to get to a date. Now, the story isn't angled at girls, but I can already hear the groans coming from the boy's section. Hopefully the gameplay of the title will keep you boys interested; players draw platforms for Felicity and Felix to grind on, making this a title that you design as you play. In order to keep your partner's interest, levels must be completed with speed and style ... otherwise the pair will ditch their dates, despairingly.

I think I've already mentioned Street Fighter IV. What else was at E3? Oh! Fallout 3 fans will be happy to know that a half-hour play

session of the new Bethesda title revealed a game of great polish and freedom. I didn't like Oblivion, but I'm going to try Fallout 3. That says something right there. Quirky humor, a daring combat system, and a gorgeous, devastated world meant that those thirty minutes flew by like three.

Capcom stole the show for me. I know, I know: I've already talked about Street Fighter IV. But that wasn't the only Capcom champ at the convention center. Megaman 9 was available to play (only two bosses were selectable, unfortunately), and my brief time with the title inspired this issue's interview with producer Hironobu Takeshita. Resident Evil 5 was on tour, but the controller was still stuck in classic mode (rumors abound that RE5 will feature a more Gears-of-War-inspired secondary control scheme). RE5 is going to be great, despite the fact that it plays a little like a hi-res RE4. That's not a complaint, mind you—just be expecting an expansion pack, and you'll be happily surprised.

And then there's Street Fighter IV. Since I promised I wouldn't talk about it, I won't bore you with the insane list of characters coming to home systems. There aren't any platform-exclusive fighters, so every one of the awesome brawlers are coming to every version of the game. Okay, okay, I'll stop talking about Street Fighter IV. It's a shame, though. If you guys weren't so tired of my frothing about it, I might have let something slip. And no, it doesn't involve braided blond hair ... though I'm sure we'll see some of that, too.



Spotlight Game: Street Fighter IV

I would give game of the show to Street Fighter IV's alternate costumes if I could. Though they weren't exploited at E3, they are in the game, and getting to play as Zangief in Hagar's (Final Fight) costume, or El Fuerte in a chef hat, or shirtless Ryu ... all I can say is that the game is hitting the right notes of fan-service and deep, compelling game-play. Safari Gear Blanka? Are those his clothes, or did he eat them off of somebody?



Hopefully, Chun Li wasn't wanting to have children.



BEST BY
Sept '08

Heather Campbell Concentrate
(100% From the Street)

E3 Wrap-Up

On January 12th, 1996, after a decade of near-total Nintendo loyalty, Square famously announced that Final Fantasy VII would be coming to PlayStation. The decision was primarily motivated by an unfavorable reaction to Nintendo 64's cartridge format; Square simply wanted more space. On the surface, it was an artistic decision.

On July 14th, 2008, after a decade of near-total Sony loyalty, Square Enix dramatically announced that Final Fantasy XIII would be coming to Xbox 360. No pretense of artistry was made. This was about money.

We'd heard for months that depressing PlayStation 3 sales meant 360 ports of its last remaining third party exclusives of note—Metal Gear Solid 4 and FFXIII—were a foregone conclusion. It was therefore not a huge surprise when Square Enix CEO Yoichi Wada left Microsoft's E3

Oops

Square Did It Again

Natural Nick Des Barres
(50% Des Barres, 50% Rox)



BEST BY
Sept '08

conference stage after a tepid RPG montage, returned with feigned forgetfulness, then let a seven month old prerendered trailer do the talking for him. The last time this video was shown, a title card proclaimed "For PLAYSTATION 3 Only"; now, it read "Available at launch on Xbox 360 in North America and Europe."

And that's how it went down, reminding us amidst the cheers of Xbox faithful that the benign Square Enix of the last ten years once shook the industry to its very foundations with a single policy shift. Although

the revelation at E3 wasn't nearly so significant as the one in 1996—FFXIII is still coming out on PS3, and will remain exclusive to that platform in Japan—it is clear an era has ended.

Thus Final Fantasy goes multiplatform, and the effects

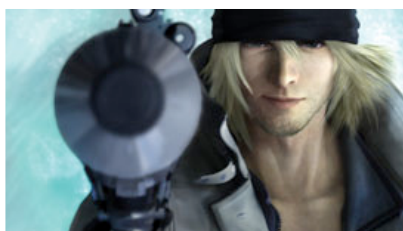
of such a thing cannot be undone. Barring heavy development subsidizing by Sony or Microsoft, never again will a megabudget third party HD game remain exclusive to PS3 or Xbox 360. Western superpublishers like EA and Ubisoft have released their key franchises on every platform known to man for years; Japan has never followed the same model. But Square Enix's new policy of platform agnosticism will likely spur a sea change in the way Japanese third parties do business. If nothing else, it should do much to convince them that they must begin to focus on the West, lest they be dragged down by their crumbling domestic market. The Japanese public no longer seems to care about traditional video games, but we still do. And we own a heck of a lot of Xbox 360s.

Last year Yoichi Wada said he believed Japan represented only 20% of the worldwide video game market. This year, he acted on that belief. In the end, it can only be positive for the Japanese game industry. Xbox 360 consoles sales in that country may still hover around 600,000 units, but there are more than fifteen million of them in Occidental lands. The 360's dismal performance in Japan probably presented a powerful psychological barrier to developers in that country, but thanks to Wada's pecuniary zeal and Final Fantasy XIII, that barrier has now been broken.



Spotlight Game: Final Fantasy XIII

Despite creating the biggest news at a pathetic E3, Final Fantasy XIII refuses to exist in any tangible form. Since its debut at E3 2006, fans have continually been shown slight updates of the same trailer, and so it was this year as well. Sure, the designs are beautiful and everything... everyone loves strawberry blonde heroine Lightning and that rad transforming Shiva cycle... but the time has come to convince us the game is actually being made.



Mr 33 cm is only here because we had no good pictures of Nom-chan we could use.



Either you get it.

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MONTHLY

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Real-time image from Crysis Warhead

Zen and the Art of Engine Maintenance

Under the hood with the game industry's engine elite

words Mike Griffin

Several years into this console generation, have we reached an early plateau of computational potential in the Wii, Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3? According to a round table of game industry experts I spoke to, the answer is a resounding “no way” across the board. Top developers are genuinely positive about the bright future ahead for current consoles, specifically a reservoir of performance yet to be tapped in the 360 and PS3. If the core specs of a console remain unchanged, how does a developer convince the device to defy the parameters of hardware and produce dazzling results? With an outstanding engine, of course.

The engine is the almighty underlying link between you, your games machine, and the experience: it handles the renderer, memory manager, collision system, animation, AI, scripting, networking and sound events. Created by some of Earth's most intelligent men and women, the modern game engine is a remarkable achievement in the understanding of geometry, physics, light and color. The beauty of a strong, versatile engine with a comprehensive toolset is its usability: after the initial blitz of R&D during its creation, a good engine will later reduce the number of programmers needed on a project, giving artists and designers direct access to game building tools. And a good engine makes room for third-party plug-ins like Morpheme, Havok and SpeedTree that specialize in very specific rendering calculations.

‘Created by some of Earth’s most intelligent men and women, the modern game engine is a remarkable achievement in the understanding of geometry, physics, light and color.’

Optimize or stagnate

“There is definitely a peak potential for any console, however I would say that there's still plenty of potential for squeezing performance out of current systems. We just have to work harder at optimizing,” says Mike Ball, Chief Technology Officer at Ninja Theory, developers of Heavenly Sword for PS3. “Take the SPUs on the PS3 for example. If you move a piece of C++ code to the SPU, you free up the main PPU processor to work on other tasks. That's a *major* speed up, so that's the first thing that developers do—but in the majority of cases that's as far as the optimization goes. You can then use engine tools to further optimize the SPU code: using hand optimized assembler code yields a much higher level of performance. But the time it takes to do this is just not available to most developers.”

This is where a good engine comes in. Establishing a technology foundation and constantly improving upon it. Even in simple—in terms of programming—single-core consoles like the first Xbox, you could observe constant growth as developers mastered the architecture, assembling incredible engines like Chronicles of Riddick. A multi-core system such as the 360 or PS3 is an entirely different species, requiring intricate parallel programming techniques and memory management, and with this difficulty comes depth. “Next-gen consoles have multiple cores and use concurrent programming. This is very difficult, especially in real-time systems such as game code. My guess is that the current top games utilize something like 50%, maybe up to 70% of the console's total computational power and are still getting amazing results,” says Pawel Zawodny, Techland's chief development officer. “I can assure you that the games we're working on now are already looking much, much better and running smoother than our last one—Call of Juarez.”

LEGEND

CPU: Central Processing Unit. The mother brain of your game device. • **GPU:** Graphics Processing Unit. Draws the world, objects and effects. • **RAM:** Random Access Memory. Data storage on integrated circuits.

Heavenly streaming



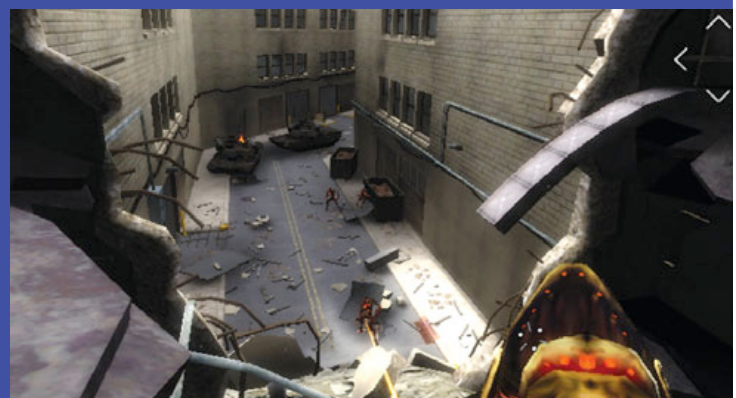
Heavenly Sword streams large sectors of geometry off the disc as you progress through levels, a technique being employed by more and more PS3 games, in addition to pre-game installations that improve data caching.

If memory serves...

Some technical specifications are difficult to grasp, but most gamers understand the absolute power of RAM. This is where the buck stops, where the developer has to condense and load all that elaborate engine code. A lower spec, non-HD system like the Wii can make do with 100 or so megabytes of RAM, while the 512 MB available to the Xbox 360 and PS3 is sometimes barely adequate. "The 512 MB of RAM in the 360 is a big challenge for us and we spend a significant amount of the console version's shipping deadline on compression techniques," contends Jason Mitchell, one of Valve's top software engineers, now optimizing the updated Source engine in Left 4 Dead. "This compression comes in a variety of forms, from geometry quantization to clever texture compositing of multiple lower-resolution textures. Our console assets are designed to be quite scalable, however."

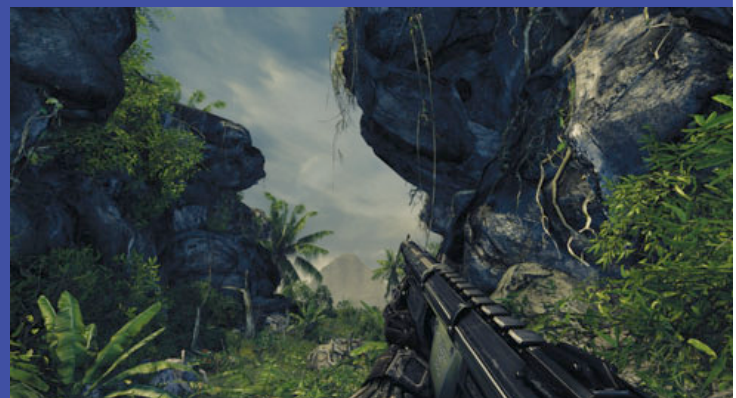
Many next-gen developers are finding ways to harness the next-gen consoles' massive computing power to compensate for slightly weaker areas like memory. Teams that are simultaneously creating versions targeted to PC users with several gigabytes of RAM have an especially keen insight here. "The main thing is that the footprint of the consoles' OS is much smaller, and you don't have to worry about the user running 20 other programs in other windows or anything like that. So while PCs generally have more, not all memory setups are created equal," Explains Gavin Carter, Lead Producer on Bethesda's highly anticipated Fallout 3. "We'd always like extra of course, but we've found efficient ways to partition the console memory. We have a large amount for everything happening on screen, and then in the background we're swapping in and out other objects and characters as the player moves through the world to keep things smooth. Consoles are very good about providing fast and direct access to all contents of memory, so that helps."

Quantum leap



High Voltage Software will shatter expectations of the Wii's rendering and texturing capabilities in their Quantum3 Engine-powered The Conduit.

Go Psycho



More players will be able to experience the adventures of Mike "Psycho" Sykes when Crysis Warhead arrives this fall sporting a dramatically optimized version of the amazing CryEngine 2, designed to run smoothly on High settings through a \$600 PC.

"My guess is that the current top games utilize something like 50%, maybe up to 70% of the console's total computational power."
Pawel Zawodny, Chief Development Officer **Techland**

Sacred knowledge



With 22 square miles of game world spread across three climate zones, all with hand crafted art and no loading times, Sacred 2 is one of the most sophisticated classic-style action RPGs to date. Daniel Dumont, team leader for the Xbox 360 and PS3 versions, extols the strengths of console: "Our shaders and particles work *extremely* well on consoles. Since Sacred 2 is full of different normal mapped materials, shaders like wet effects on objects during rain, and special effects when casting spells, the visuals are presented in a very high quality on next-gen console."

Cooperate and we'll all make it out of here alive

Within the last couple of years, gamers across the globe have dramatically increased adoption of high-speed internet connections, as infrastructure improves and costs go down. Developers know this fact, and they're intentionally programming their network code to handle much more precise and complex multiplayer gameplay, slowing erasing the line between offline and online campaigns. "What really makes the difference is that now more and more people treat online gaming as something completely normal and common. It is no longer limited to core multiplayer gamers, and people expect to play online as easily as they play their single player games," Techland's Pawel Zawodny postulates. "Our effort to support this in our engine is focused on having almost no difference between single and multiplayer sessions from the game programmers' and designers' point of view, so the co-op online campaign is something as natural and painless as the single player one."

Shifting the main campaign to online co-op play opens up a new can of worms, as gamers expect to see the same simulations and physics that they would experience offline, where it's considerably easier to execute. "Indeed, this leads to multiplayer games having much more interactive worlds than they used to have in the past—just as interactive as single player games are," Zawodny explains. "The online replication of thousands of dynamic objects is quite difficult. But the algorithms used for these purposes are now, after many years of online gaming, known so well that the only question is how precise the simulation within a given bandwidth scope. This is of course much easier with the average net speed getting higher and higher."

This higher ceiling has in turn caused a paradigm shift in the game genres we know. Hybrids of first-person shooters and massively multiplayer role-playing games like Huxley will soon be commonplace, and open world sandbox campaign play is quickly superseding traditional ultra-scripted campaigns. Will the latter eventually go extinct? "I'm pretty

"We've recently improved upon our facial animation system by adding support for combinatoric morphing. This system is high-end even by Hollywood standards."

Jason Mitchell, Software Engineer Valve

sure that both types of games have a long future ahead. Players love both: the intense emotions of scripted, more linear games, and the socializing or open world exploration of MMOs and RPG-FPS hybrids like Dead Island. Still, from the designer's point of view, in open world games it's going to be really hard—maybe even impossible—to achieve the same pace and intensity as more scripted games. I'm sure that the traditional games will evolve to have more of the socializing factor, which means easy lobbying of players to play the campaigns in co-op mode, or sometimes even as competing opponents in the same campaign..." Zawodny posits, no doubt teasing Warhound's globe-trotting mercenary campaign.

When a SpeedTree falls in the forest



One of this generation's most popular middleware solutions is SpeedTree, IDV's beloved foliage generator. SpeedTree is the preferred solution in Unreal Engine 3-powered next-gen titles like Square Enix's Last Remnant, as it takes full advantage of multiple cores and geometry instancing, planting thousands of low-cost trees in otherworldly forests.



L'eggo my EGO

Q&A

Bryan Marshall, Chief Technology Officer **Codemasters**

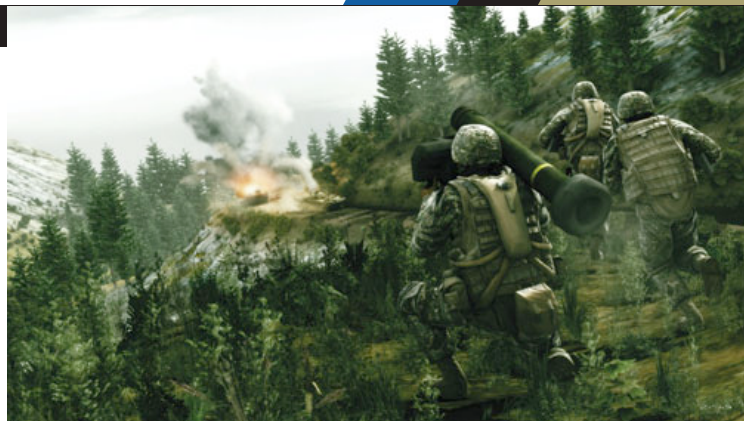


play: After DiRT and GRID, it's clear that your EGO engine is fine-tuned to produce stunning racing games. Soon we'll see EGO at war in the sprawling battlefields of Operation Flashpoint 2. How did you adjust the engine?

Bryan: The strength of the EGO racing tech is starting to show in a number of different areas in Operation Flashpoint 2. The biggest challenge we had without a doubt is the move towards a huge sprawling island, whilst keeping the graphical fidelity that made DiRT and GRID stand out. We're now well over that hill. The lighting and shadows in GRID were always dynamic but we never got to show them off because the racing period is so quick. In OFP2, that dynamic system is now shown to full effect, with 24 hour day-to-night cycles and changeable lighting conditions. In terms of damage, military tanks don't dent like cars, so we're using a different but equally impressive vehicle damage system. To accompany that, every visual effect from GRID has been taken up a notch.

Is there something about the Xbox 360 or PS3 architecture that is particularly good at performing tasks in the EGO engine?

Horses for courses, really. For instance, the PS3 SPUs were great at simulating the



30,000 plus animated spectators in GRID, whereas the 360 is stronger at handling generalized code. Developers will only get more and more performance out of these things; I think most developers are only really starting to get to grips with the PS3 properly.

"...the PS3 SPUs were great at simulating the 30,000 plus animated spectators in GRID."

Bryan Marshall, Chief Technology Officer **Codemasters**



The undying adaptability of Source

Q&A

Jason Mitchell, Software Engineer **Valve**

play: Source has been in service for four years now, a great workhorse for Half-Life 2, and it continues to evolve...

Jason: We're constantly improving the Source engine with each game we release. We've recently improved upon our facial animation system by adding support for combinatoric morphing. This system is high-end even by Hollywood standards, hardware-accelerated using vertex texturing.

Can the next-gen consoles handle this accelerated facial animation?

We can run the combinatoric morphing system on the 360 because the ATI GPU in the 360 has a unified shader pipeline, and hence has performant vertex texture fetches. This is not true of the PS3 GPU, which is not a DX10-class chip. And the performant vertex texture fetches are the key to GPU-accelerated facial morphing.

Left 4 Dead is going to showcase the new Source. What else has been added to the engine since Orange Box?

The most notable new component of Source for Left 4 Dead is the AI Director, which is constantly tailoring the intensity of the game to create the highs and lows that are part of any good adventure. This keeps the game fresh even though a player may experience a given scenario many times. Besides the AI Director, animation system improvements, the addition of self-shadowed normal mapping, and a set of filmic post-processing effects which are tied to the game state.

When you're actually in Left 4 Dead running for your life from zombies, how are these engine

improvements going to make things more terrifying?

Probably the most noticeable effect of the animation improvements is that the Infected can now anticipate turns and lean into them as they run. The believability that this adds to the game is very exciting. The self-shadowed normal mapping adds a more tactile sense of texture to surfaces in the world, especially as the players and their flashlights explore and move around the game. The filmic post-processing techniques serve stylistic goals, but also tie into game state so that we are subtly communicating player health and other game states in this manner. And on console in particular, we have added split-screen capabilities to the Source engine, since this works so well with the co-operative experience of Left 4 Dead.

Sounds like you've been spending quality time on Xbox 360. Here's one for you: Is anti-aliasing really "free" on 360, thanks to the embedded EDRAM on the ATI graphics chip?

The MSAA (multisample anti-aliasing) capabilities of the 360 are hamstrung by the limited amount of EDRAM on the GPU. A 720p color and z-buffer don't actually fit into that quantity of EDRAM, making MSAA hard to use. If one were rendering at a lower resolution than 720p, or if Microsoft had chosen to put more EDRAM on the chip, then MSAA would be practically free because of the efficiency of ATI's anti-aliasing design.

"...the Infected can now anticipate turns and lean into them as they run."

Jason Mitchell, Software Engineer **Valve**

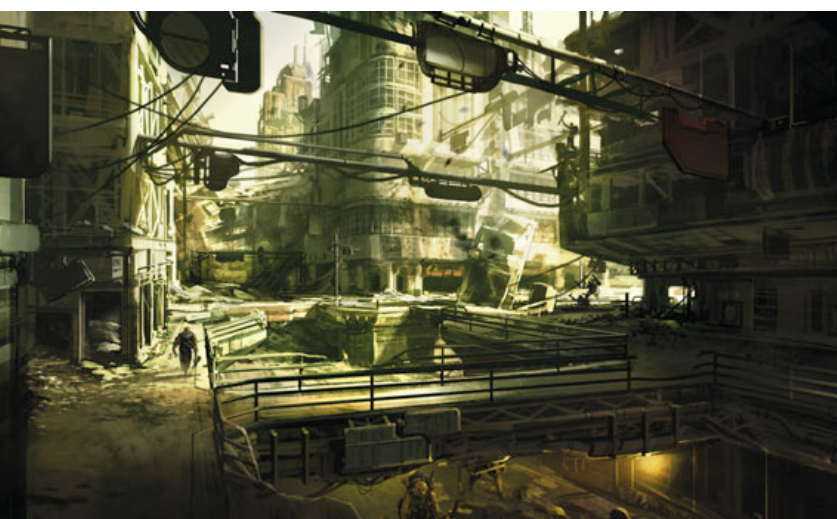




Carmack attack

A few years ago we were warned by id Software's veteran tech master John Carmack that his next game engine may be his last. Whether he retires from engine building or not, it's obvious that idTech5, Carmack's latest endeavor (shown here in Rage, EA's post-apocalyptic action adventure), will once again raise the bar. idTech5 fully supports PS3, Xbox 360, PC and Mac with run-time reloading of cross-platform assets, allowing for rapid iteration of a developer's game content.

The integrated tools suite, idStudio, makes level construction and texturing a simple, fast and intuitive process, allowing artists to "paint" every surface in the 3D game world uniquely using an enhanced version of the Mega Texture feature from the Doom 3 engine. Speaking of Doom: Doom 4 has entered internal development at id Software. Unlike Rage, which runs on idTech5 at 60 frames per second, Carmack has selected 30 FPS for Doom 4 to focus the engine's horsepower on stunningly complex character and environment detail.



Out of Africa



Far Cry 2 is set to be one of this fall's most sophisticated multi-platform releases. The striking crime-ridden savannahs in this intense sandbox shooter were built in Ubisoft Montreal's proprietary Dunia Engine. "The key goals for the engine were supporting large, seamless open worlds with vast draw distances and zero loading screens," Far Cry 2's Technology Director Dominic Guay tells **play**. "Highly dynamic environments with interactive vegetation and destructibility, including the support of propagating fire, dynamic rendering of real-time 24 hour cycles, and robust online functionality. Dunia is optimized to run on 360, PS3 and PC, we scale to use any number of available cores, and it also includes multi-GPU scalability on PC."



Floodgate of carnage

Thanks to the engine's versatile Floodgate technology, Emergent's Gamebryo is ideal for developers that need efficient cross-platform CPU code. BottleRocket chose Gamebryo for its current project, the next-gen Splatterhouse remake, featuring the return of Rick and his trademark gore-encrusted 2x4. "The real advantage of Floodgate is that it allows us to write code that is almost entirely platform independent, but that still runs well on different CPU architectures," explains Rich Karp, Director of Technology at BottleRocket. "Besides Floodgate, Gamebryo's fragment system allows us to develop custom materials piece-by-piece and integrate them into the rendering pipeline with little additional effort. This saves us from having to hand-code lots of individual shaders for Splatterhouse, but still gives us all the variety we need to achieve its dark and unique style."



Gamebryo

"Both consoles have a lot of computational power—much more than typical games use on PCs." **Pawel Zawodny**, Chief Development Officer **Techland**

In the Fallout of Oblivion

Q&A

Gavin Carter, Lead Producer **Fallout 3**

play: That highly modified Gamebryo engine served you very well in Oblivion. How does Fallout 3 update the engine's rendering and image quality to 2008 standards?

Gavin: We've altered pretty much every aspect of the Oblivion engine to handle the demands of Fallout 3. We've had to add features like dismemberment for NPCs and enemies, object destruction for things like cars. We've also added a suite of visual effects that we call Image Space Modifiers. These modifiers can alter the hue, saturation, and contrast level of the screen, as do effects like depth of field, to give focus to particular elements. And a lot of time was spent simply making everything run faster than it did in Oblivion, so we could pack the screen with more visual density. So in Fallout 3 you'll have more enemies on the screen, more objects, and more activity in general without game performance bogging down.

Does Fallout 3 take full advantage of the Xbox 360 and PS3 hard drives to accelerate loading and improve game performance?

Yes, just like Oblivion, we stream several gigs of data to the console hard drive to provide faster access and reduce all the load times.

What gameplay situations in Fallout 3 really demonstrate the engine's new ballistics and physics system?

The best situations to see this in are during VATS sequences. VATS is the Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System and allows you to pause time, target specific areas of an enemy, and queue up moves that are then executed in a cinematic fashion. Visually, VATS plays out using various camera

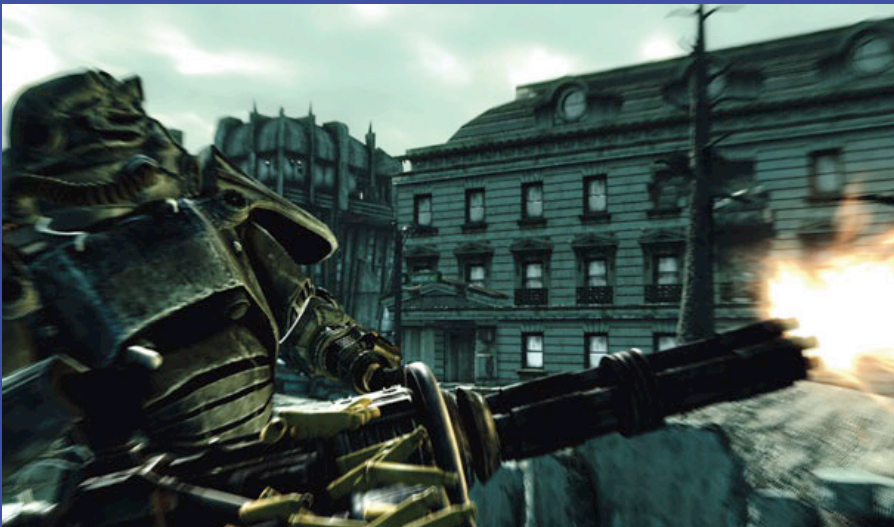
angles and time-shift effects like you might see in a crash in Burnout, or in a movie like 300. For instance, you could fire a sniper rifle into a mutant's head, and the camera will follow the bullet along its path, then shift back as the mutant's head explodes in slow-motion, sending eyes, jawbone, and gore chunks flying in all directions.

How about players that want to experience satisfying action FPS combat in Fallout 3's world?

We looked at lots of other FPS games and spent a long time tweaking the feel and animation of characters and weapons to make sure combat is satisfying. We don't force our VATS combat system on the player. If you prefer faster action, or you're just out of action points, real-time combat is an option. Your skills there will also be heavily dependent on the condition of your weapon.

"...the camera will follow the bullet along its path, then shift back as the mutant's head explodes in slow-motion, sending eyes, jawbone, and gore chunks flying in all directions."

Gavin Carter, Lead Producer **Fallout 3**



"...in open world games it's going to be really hard—maybe even impossible—to achieve the same pace and intensity as more scripted games."

Pawel Zawodny, Chief Development Officer **Techland**

Chrome Dome

Q&A

Pawel Zawodny, Chief Development Officer **Techland**

play: We've been asking developers what kind of mileage they get out of the next-gen consoles. For example, is 512 MB of RAM a tight squeeze for your 360 and PS3 projects, Warhound and Dead Island?

Pawel: I think half a gig of RAM is still not that small an amount these days. Both consoles have a lot of computational power—much more than typical games use on PCs. This power can be used in real-time to procedurally generate a game's visual content that would normally be pre-calculated and stored in memory; memory that you need to conserve on consoles. This is even more important for large outdoor environments with vast interactive vegetation, one of the strongest advantages of the Chrome Engine. This is what we use a lot in our engine to make the worlds look amazing on 360 and PS3.

Chrome Engine is among the elite now, with the likes of Unreal Engine 3 and CryEngine 2. Every next-gen engine has a few exceptional features. What else can yours do?

Chrome Engine 4 boasts a very efficient method of constructing and rendering buildings in outdoor urban environments. It allows us to save a lot of time building the levels and also requires very little memory, while ensuring incredible visual variety. We have also spent huge amounts of time developing a truly realistic lighting model that includes a very interesting way of lighting blended surfaces with special effects. Sorry, but I can't get into too many details here, as this is where we compete with the other engines you mentioned—but I hope the images speak for themselves.



This brick house is annihilated by a tank shell in a shower of complex physics.



Techland won't reveal its secret lighting method, however the results speak volumes: a tropical sun beams down on Dead Island's forsaken village, its surfaces radiating through expertly applied HDR and post-process effects.

THE DS RPG REVOLUTION

Xbox 360 the premiere JRPG platform? How last year

words Casey Loe / Nick Des Barres / Dai Kohama

The RPG business used to be simple: Consoles got original titles and numbered sequels, while handhelds got remakes and farmed-out spin-offs. It was true of every member of the GameBoy family, and it was certainly true of the Nintendo DS...until now. Dragon Quest IX may have disappeared without a trace, but 2008 will still be the year that original, high-budget RPG epics come to roost on the Nintendo DS, thanks to Namco Bandai's recently announced Tales of Hearts (to be released sometime in 2008 in Japan) and Sega's upcoming World Destruction (September 25). Both companies are bringing the large teams and budgets of major console titles to a platform on which low development cost was once considered its greatest strength.

Tales of Hearts

Tales of Hearts will be the third Tales game to hit the DS, but it's the first to be developed internally by Namco Tales Studio, and its production values suggest a much higher budget than its outsourced predecessors. Namco clearly has high expectations for the title, as their own economic forecast calls for double the sales of last year's Tales of Innocence.

The most extravagant aspect of Tales of Hearts is its two different styles of event scenes—one hand-animated by the series' usual partner, Production I.G., and the other using realistic (well, sort of) pre-rendered CG by studio Shirogumi. The developers refuse to confirm whether or not both styles will be packed into the same cartridge, leading to

"Tales of Hearts features hand-drawn characters in surprisingly impressive 3-D environments."





speculation that they'll be releasing two different versions so that players can choose the style that appeals to them most (or, preferable to Namco Bandai, buy both).

On the field of exploration, *Tales of Hearts* features hand-drawn characters in surprisingly impressive 3-D environments. On the battlefield, everything is hand-drawn, and combat returns to the side-scrolling perspectives of the series' earliest installments. Dubbed the Combination Aerial Linear Motion Battle System (CNAR-LIMBS to its friends), *Tales of Hearts* revolves heavily around midair acrobatics and multi-character combos that involve both a fighter on the field and one pulled in from off the bench.

Most importantly, every *Tales* game has its own novelty genre, and we're pleased to report that *Tales of Hearts* promises to be the world's first "Meeting of Hearts RPG." With that and the title and heroine Kohaku Hearts, brace yourself for a great many eye-rolling "heart" puns when *Tales of Hearts* ships in December.



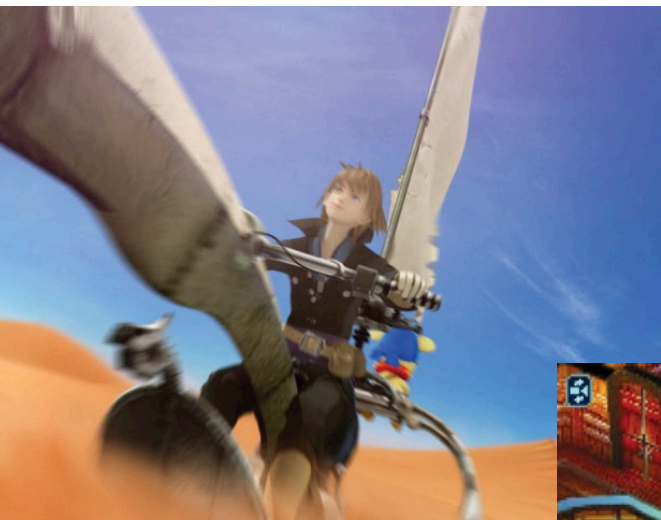
World Destruction

Between Sega and their development partner Image Epoch, *World Destruction* is rumored to have a staff of over 50 people—larger than many next-gen console teams. That's a tremendous amount of money to risk on an original title, so Sega isn't taking any chances—they're building a massive franchise around *World Destruction*, with a weekly animated series already airing and a monthly manga beginning soon.

But don't let Sega's mainstream ambitions lead you to believe that *World Destruction* will be some tepid, generic fantasy franchise. The story (written by *Chrono* series scribe Masato Kato) is set in a world that has gone horribly awry, where man is enslaved by beasts and the planet is sinking under a sea of sand. So the heroes of the game decide to initiate the next step in the world's historic cycle of destruction and rebirth, casting themselves in the



THE DS RPG REVOLUTION



"World Destruction employs a Grandia-esque isometric perspective that allows players to rotate the environment freely."

role of world destroyers and the game's villains in the role of the world's saviors.

Your journey of world destruction will take you through a game that looks very much like *Tales of Hearts*, with 3-D environments and hand-drawn characters. But while *Tales* uses preset camera angles, *World Destruction* employs a Grandia-esque isometric perspective that allows players to rotate the environment freely. The battles in *World Destruction* are turn-based affairs that span both screens of the Nintendo DS, and feature a number of very unusual systems. For example, players can find and equip new lines of voiced dialogue to different moves, and each voice clip has the power to alter the properties of the attack that triggers it.

Like *Tales*, *World Destruction* uses a double-size 2-gigabit cartridge to pack in prerendered cut-scenes, a theme song from some hacky Japanese boy band, and plenty of voiced dialogue. *World Destruction* will also be making room for an original soundtrack by Yasunori Mitsuda of *Xenosaga* and *Chrono Cross* fame, while *Tales of Hearts* will be cramming in another half-assed Motoi Sakuraba score (although at least that'll be half an ass better than *Tales of Innocence's* musical dreck).

Both titles began production when the DS was riding high, but times may be changing; Japanese DS software sales have fallen by almost 50 percent from their 2007 highs, while the PSP has been steadily winning over hardcore RPG fans with the Monster Hunter franchise. With high cartridge production costs and growing development costs, is the DS even the right place for such titles anymore? Between Tales, World Destruction, and the half-dozen other major RPGs in the pipeline (see sidebar), we'll have a definitive answer by year's end.

...and More

DS is the heir apparent to PS2 as the dominant gaming platform in Japan; accordingly, an astonishing number of large-scale RPGs are making their way to the platform in 2008. In an era where most DS software is put together by tiny teams in a matter of months, the following games stand out not only because of their large budgets, but also because of the names involved. Here's a look at the most significant announced titles dropping this year.



Avalon Code Marvelous, October 16 (Japan)

The name Matrix may not be familiar to you, but if you're a DS-owning JRPG fan, you've probably played one of their games: They are the ghost developer behind the Final Fantasy III and IV remakes. Avalon Code is their first original game, and it's looking spectacular.



Inazuma Eleven Level-5, August 22 (Japan)

Level-5, developer of the (supposed) upcoming Dragon Quest IX, will soon release Inazuma Eleven, a "nurturing soccer RPG." Inazuma replaces standard RPG battles with furious footballer action, and like World Destruction, also happens to be at the center of a multimedia franchise.



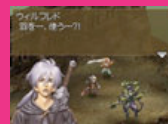
RIZ-ZOAWD D3 Publishing, Winter 2008 (Japan)

Just in case you didn't see developer Media.Vision's RIZ-ZOAWD in the August edition of Play Japan, here's another chance. RIZ-ZOAWD is a JRPG adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*, and is clearly on the short list for most beautiful DS game of all time.



Sigma Harmonics Square Enix, August 21 (Japan)

Possibly the highest-budget game on this list, Sigma Harmonics marks a return to the madcap original IP-testin' Squaresoft of the PS1 era. A fusion of mystery adventure and RPG, *Sigma* sports big-name talent like producer Yoshinori Kitase (FFVI, VII, VIII, X, XIII) and composer Masashi Hamauzu (FFXIII).



Valkyrie Profile: The Condemned One
Square Enix, October 2 (Japan)

I don't think anyone was expecting a Valkyrie Profile on DS, much less a game developed by original staff like artists Kou and You Yoshinari (real-life twins), composer Motoi Sakuraba, and producer Yoshinori Kondo. VP DS retains the series' actiony battles, but swaps the traditional 2-D view for an isometric one.



Winds of Nostalgeo Tecmo, Fall 2008 (Japan)

Winds of Nostalgeo represents a reunion of sorts for some of the key creators behind Tengai Makyō, the legendary PC-engine RPG series. Producer Oji Hiroi and character designer Torajiro Tsujino join forces with the prolific Matrix to weave this tale of 19th-century airship adventure.

Metal Slug 7

Let it die

words Nick Des Barres



I allowed myself to be cautiously optimistic about Metal Slug 7. After a steep and rapid decline in quality following the mythic Metal Slug 3 (particularly painful were the farming-out of sequels to Korea, endless asset recycling, and a hideous 3-D abortion on PS2), Metal Slug 6 was actually pretty good. Could the series' DS debut be worthy?

Alas, no. I should have known better. SNK Playmore just doesn't love me anymore. In fact, the company now seems to actively dislike me. How else to explain this unfortunate mess? 7 is the shortest Metal Slug yet, there are no new player characters, and branching paths are gone. 90 percent of the graphics are recycled legacy assets. The game runs at 30 fps—traditional for the series, but unforgivable in 2008. Sprites are not displayed at a 1:1 ratio, but instead are zoomed out and scaled down, transforming them into blocky soup.

Inconceivably, there is no two-player mode.

The lone compliment I can offer Slug 7 is that it has a neat bonus mode. The home version of Metal Slug X featured a "Combat School" that allowed you to play through various bite-size, objective-based missions and receive rankings for each. Slug 7 revives the concept, and its Combat School has 60 of these mini-missions. I wish I could find some more nice things to say about the game, but I am truly at a loss. When this is the best you can do, it's time to let a series die.

parting shot 

A total disaster. If you absolutely must play Metal Slug on your DS, you'd be better off finding a used copy of Metal Slug Advance.

Endless Frontier

Super Robot Wars
OG Saga

Namco Bandai RPG All Stars!

words Nick Des Barres



System: Nintendo DS | Developer: Monolith | Publisher: Banpresto | Available: Now Japan



One of my favorite pleasures in gaming are those rare occasions when a title you took no notice of proves that it rocks. You can't be let down by a game if it wasn't on your radar to begin with, and you gain the double advantage of going in completely blind, unspoiled by a year of previews and trailers. So it was with the charming Endless Frontier from Nintendo-owned developer Monolith, a game that I think is probably the best original RPG yet released on DS.

Endless Frontier is nominally part of the Super Robot Wars series, but it features no licensed mecha, nor any strategy gameplay. Instead it is a completely new story, told with both original characters and semi-canonical, dimension-hopping appearances from Monolith folks like Xenosaga's KOS-MOS and the heroes of Namco X Capcom. The only tangible connection to Super Robot comes in the form of the brilliant, beautiful battle system: a highly-animated, eight-character affair, Frontier's utterly unhinged fighting-game-inspired gameplay

comes complete with extensive juggles, tag attacks, and super combos. It's the most enjoyable JRPG battle system I've encountered in years, with some of the finest sprite work on the platform.

It's clear Monolith spent nearly their entire graphics budget on the battles; fields and dungeons are only adequate. A loopy story, imminently likable characters, lengthy quest and groovy retro soundtrack more than make up for this single shortcoming, however, and with no connection to any previous Super Robot game and no pricey royalties to pay for licensed mecha, Endless Frontier is ripe for the localizing. Atlus, are you reading this?

parting shot 

Lovely graphics, a battle system that never gets old, and nutty, personable characters means a great JRPG. Someone needs to license Endless Frontier for a Western release now.

preview

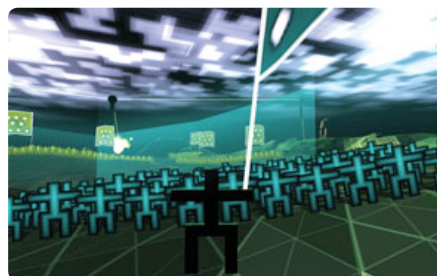
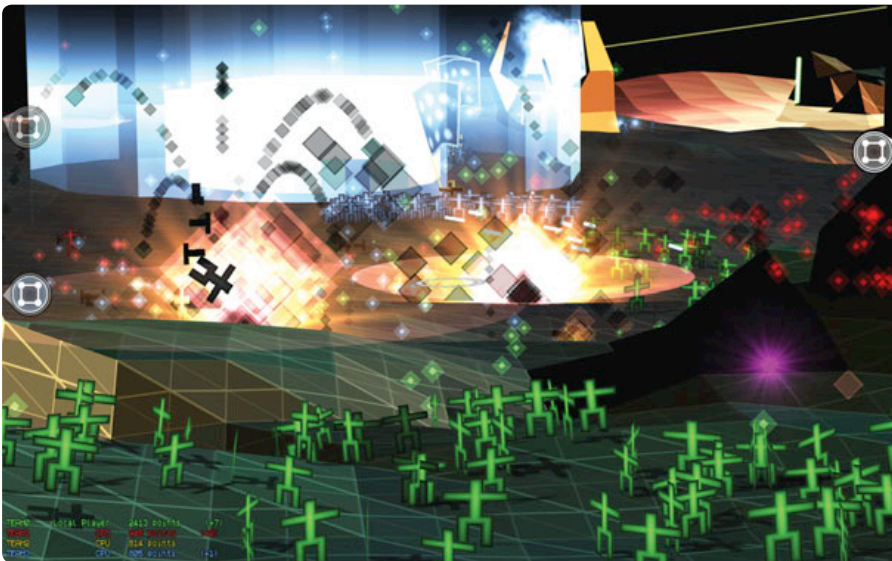
System: PC | Developer: Introversion | Publisher: Introversion | Multi: 6 MP modes | Available: September



Multiwinia

The flat of the land

words Mike Griffin



"The game's inimitable visual style will look superb on HDTV."

When you talk about U.K. developer Introversion, it's sort of like discussing U.K. band The Prodigy, in that you're often talking about one guy. Yeah, firestarters Keith Flint and Maxim are part of The Prodigy's identity and voice, but it's always been about Liam Howlett's big beats. Introversion pipelines plenty of talent into its titles, but they wouldn't be the games you know without the singular touch of creative director Chris Delay. Soon the Xbox 360 faithful will experience Darwinia, Introversion's wonderfully stylized and streamlined hybrid RTS, and Delay's prodigious gifts will be known again in Multiwinia, Darwinia's clever multiplayer offspring, also coming to PC and Mac. You first-timers are going to be in Darwinian heaven in September.

It feels good to return to Dr. Sepulveda's stark fractal abyss in Multiwinia: Survival of the Flattest. My little Darwinians have developed a real mean streak since the last time we campaigned. As in life, when peace reigns for too long, people start itching for war. Entire tribes have rebelled, and Introversion has given them six modes to sort out their differences in Multiwinia—with players battling each other or the AI. Familiar variations of Domination, Assault and King of the Hill join Capture the Statue (just like it sounds; your Multiwinians must carry a huge electronic effigy home), the base-linking of Blitzkrieg, and Rocket Riot, where defenders attempt to fuel up a rocket and escape before attackers can close in and destroy everything. I can only vouch for the first four modes available in our preview, but in each mode Introversion demonstrates a keen grasp of multiplayer RTS map design.

I've been branding the Darwinia/Multiwinia games as "real-time strategy" because it's a familiar reference point for you, but please don't conjure up visions of Command & Conquer and StarCraft. Introversion strips away all the fat that binds most RTS games, like gaudy and clumsy interfaces, resource mining, and tedious unit micro-management, instead streamlining via stylized minimalism. I'm playing the PC version of Multiwinia using both mouse and keyboard and the Xbox 360 controller mode to get a feel for the console adaptations. Introversion has made some great decisions in this regard, distilling Darwinia's combat controls for maximum multiplayer fluency. It's not quite as zippy as moving around the map on PC and Mac via WASD and mouse-look camera, but if someone told you that Darwinia and Multiwinia originated on console and you didn't know any better, the retrofitted controls would be very convincing.

As the multiplayer component for new Darwinia players on Xbox 360, Multiwinia will complete an outstanding XBLA package. The game's inimitable visual style will look superb on HDTV, while its menacing soundscapes (and the Darwinians' tragic death wails!) will light up 5.1 surround systems. Veterans of the game on PC and Mac will also love this new multiplayer-focused foray. Once again, some fine work behind the decks by Mr. Delay.

A promoted officer rallies the troops.

preview

System: PC | Developer: GSC Gameworld | Publisher: Deep Silver | Multi: 4 MP modes | Available: August



"Some anomalies won't yield to weak guns, so it's in your best interest to power up."

There's a simple reason why S.T.A.L.K.E.R. received our Best Atmosphere accolade last year: because it was tense as hell, and this tension was sustained by an overriding sense of dread and paranoia conveyed by fallen Chernobyl's abandoned and contaminated ruins. It was the bleakness of the exclusion zone, the frightening anomalies, the constant A-life AI doing scary, intelligent-looking things, the ghostly wind and bristling of half-dead vegetation, and a tapestry of shadows drawn by that powerful X-ray engine. The prequel, Clear Sky, will take place one year prior to the events of the original game in 2011, a time when artifact-seeking mercenaries formed strong competing factions to scour the Zone at the peak of its anomalous activity.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.'s unique atmosphere was bolstered by an interesting combination of world exploration, RPG-like missions and inventory, and a solid main campaign with multiple endings, yet it didn't quite live up to the sandbox-like scenario that GSC Gameworld had been planning and promoting. These ideas have finally coalesced in Clear Sky. To support the aforementioned war of factions, Clear Sky has embraced an open-world squad-based theme, where you, as the mercenary Scar, can optionally side with a faction and stalk the game's dozen locations in a group. All NPCs and creatures have complete freedom of movement: They'll fight each other, accomplish quests, get involved in procedurally generated A-life events, and mercenaries will return to restock or chill out by a campfire in one of four

unique bases. All this activity occurs with or without the player's involvement. The bases are hand-built affairs with unique structures, characters, and vendors, and each offer mini-games like arenas and shooting down tainted crows.

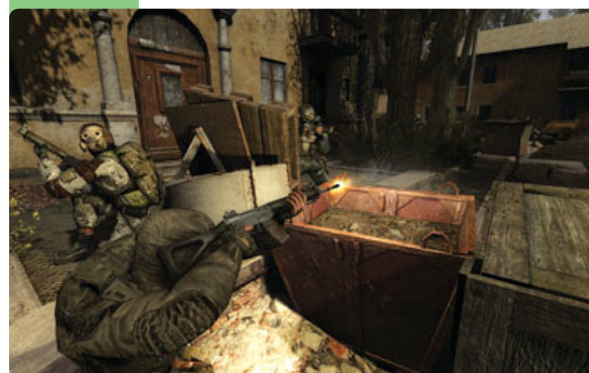
Most of this competition between the S.T.A.L.K.E.R.s (that's Scavengers, Trespassers, Adventurers, Loners, Killers, Explorers and Robbers, by the way) revolves around artifacts that formed in the wake of Chernobyl's blowout and massive release of energy. In Clear Sky there's a greater focus on artifact hunting using three different types of anomaly detectors, since valuable new items and rare forms of intelligent anomalous life (no doubt foreshadowing the Consciousness) are invisible to the naked eye. Treasure hunting and side missions will be encouraged, as Clear Sky features extensive weapon and armor upgrades to acquire. Some anomalies won't yield to weak guns, so it's in your best interest to power up. The game will introduce a new PDA and HUD to help disseminate all this item and inventory use, and you'll see your hands and body change as you adjust gear and adopt new faction uniforms or exoskeletons.

Clear Sky employs an updated version of the X-ray engine, featuring denser areas with a massive amount of assets and vegetation. Marsh, inspired by one of seven photo sessions to the Chernobyl region, is one of the most detailed levels in any FPS to date, boasting some 5,900,000 polys. The Red Forest zone has over 2,600 trees, and the detail and movement of all this greenery has been enhanced. Environments

are parallax-mapped, rainwater streams down walls, god rays pierce through cracks, and detailed characters move with improved animation blending, including collision with proper geometry prediction. This is meant to compliment the new Smart Cover moves of the AI, happily using or avoiding dynamic objects.

Clear Sky will ship with several multiplayer modes, including staples like death match and team DM, and a new capture-the-artifact mode, promising ample bonus gameplay after the 20-hour campaign. Deep Silver will be releasing the game in U.S. stores this fall, or you can fire up Steam on release day and grab the digital download. GSC promises open modability, so expect plenty of community-developed Clear Sky mischief to follow.

The ghost town of Limansk is an excellent showcase for the A-life AI's new Smart Cover moves.





Ask Alienware®

026 | 09_08

In this month's edition, we discuss shadows and draw distance and how they tax your gaming hardware. We also get to the "core" of the issue with a look at processor trends, and how to stabilize your VOIP.

q. I enjoy gaming on PC because every game includes options you can customize to get a better frame rate. From recent experiences, I would say the two biggest frame-rate killers are shadows and draw distance. This sucks, because I love shadows and being able to see far away objects. Which one of those graphical features is more GPU-dependent or CPU-dependent, and what can I do to improve them?

Tim, GA

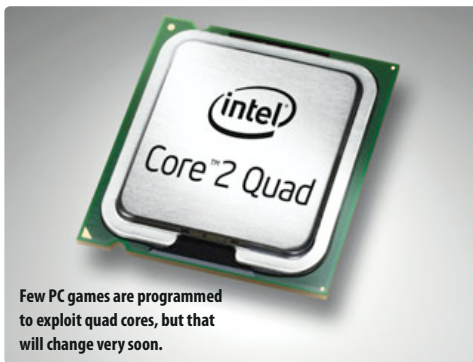


An upgrade may be in order to enjoy the shader effects and sprawling view distances of big fall titles like Fallout 3.

Alienware: You are correct in that both shadowing and draw distance are highly GPU-intensive, but draw distance will cause the most strain since it renders more polygons on the screen. Because of that, the power of your CPU will also affect your draw distance. Shadows, on the other hand, are 100 percent dependent on the GPU. Your draw distance also gets pumped up with your resolution. Technically speaking, the higher your resolution, the greater your draw distance. Consequently, as you bring your resolution down, you decrease your draw distance and the drain it has on your GPU. If your current GPU just can't hit the draw distance and shadowing at the resolution and frame rate you want, you're really going to need to look into upgrading. Good cards to consider are the ATI Radeon™ 4870 or the NVIDIA® GeForce™ 9800 GX2.

q. Are any big processors going to be released this holiday season, and if so, should I hold off on an upgrade? What's the big trend now in multi-core processing anyway: Are we trying to break speed records again, or is still about trying to stuff more cores and transistors onto a smaller piece? Do PC games see a difference between two, three, and four cores? How much more advanced is a gaming PC CPU compared to Xbox 360 and PS3?

Manny, CO



Few PC games are programmed to exploit quad cores, but that will change very soon.

Alienware: There are a few questions there, so let's address them one at a time.

1. No, don't expect many product launches around the holidays. All the major companies know they will make their sales during the holiday season regardless, so there is little incentive to launch a new product that can be used to spur interest when sales are traditionally slower. Look for the major processor upgrades to come out *after* the holidays.
2. The trend for processors is still to increase the number cores while simultaneously improving CPU architecture and efficiency. For example, Intel has plans to release a new processor architecture that places the memory controller onto the CPU. Again, look for that sometime after the holidays.
3. PC games do see a difference between two and four cores, but right now most games only take advantage of dual-core processors. Some newer games are taking full advantage of quad-core processing, and you can expect this to become the norm as newer titles are released.
4. A gaming PC's CPU is always going to be more advanced than a console's. What you have to keep in mind is that consoles are developed sometimes three years before they are released. By the time they hit the shelves, the technology is already outdated. It may dominate every other console out there, but PC technology has long since passed it by. The upgradability of PCs means that the technology is in a state of constant evolution.

"...CPU will also affect your draw distance. Shadows, on the other hand, are 100 percent dependent on the GPU."

q. I recently subscribed to a home VOIP line and it's been great, except that when I'm downloading a big update in Windows or on my Xbox 360, the voice quality becomes poor or echoes. Sometimes even during online gameplay. It's strange, because we can stream HD movies through the DVR box and the VOIP line doesn't have a problem with that. How do I make sure the VOIP line has enough of its own bandwidth?

Doug, CO



Alienware: The reason you see a difference in downloading a movie through your DVR as opposed to a Windows or Xbox 360 update is in the nature of the download itself. Your DVR doesn't attempt to download an entire HD movie in one chunk. It's calibrated to know you only need to download, say, 10 or 12 percent before you can start playing the movie. The beginning of the film plays while the remainder downloads at a pace that prevents you from catching up to the download, so you get smooth, uninterrupted playback. Windows Updates and Xbox Live simply ping the server, locate the fastest connection, and begin pulling in as many files as they can right away. Poor voice quality or echoes on your VOIP line are a result of the heavy traffic running through your pipe.

What you're experiencing is a bottleneck through your ISP. The quickest way to fix your problem is to contact your ISP and see if you can purchase additional bandwidth. If your ISP doesn't support scalable bandwidth, you may want to consider waiting to run updates until times of the day when you don't expect to be using your VOIP line.



If you have a pressing hardware-related inquiry for the Alienware experts, regarding anything from motherboards and mice to bit rates and firewalls, send it along to askalienware@playmagazine.com. Each month we'll award our favorite Ask Alienware submission with a free one-year subscription, so don't be shy!

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Real Games, Real Gamers, Real Money
REAL COMPETITION

OGPlanet weaves La Tale

Fans of side-scrolling MMORPGs like Maple Story have another option this summer, as OGPlanet launches La Tale into mainstream service. An online RPG of the casual-friendly variety, La Tale's classically styled 2-D platforming and enemy-bopping is framed in an extensive RPG and character customization system. La Tale also offers very respectable community options, like Guild Rooms where players can hang out, grow vegetables, and choose a guild emblem. Parties can adventure together across jungles and volcanoes and through ancient tombs and catacombs, or players can complete quests solo with the assistance of pets and accessories.



Good Old Games honors the classics

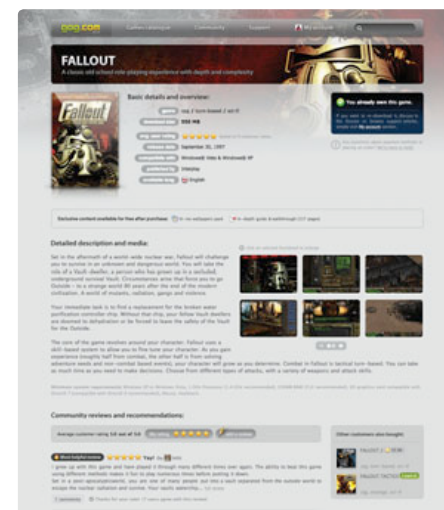


Last year, CD Projekt brought old-school RPG goodness back to PC in The Witcher. Soon you'll be able to play this team's favorite classic PC games at GOG.com, the new on-demand digital download source for Good Old Games. It's absolutely DRM-free (the game's yours and you don't need to be connected to the internet to play) and every classic has been completely optimized for XP and Vista. No game will cost more than 10 bucks (usually \$5.99). They'll even toss in the MP3 soundtrack, artwork, and a game guide. GOG.com launches in September.



Speak freely in The Agency

Sony Online Entertainment has added another feature to the range of services that their MMO subscribers receive: free voice chat. Developed by Vivox, Station Voice integrates seamlessly with Star Wars Galaxies, EverQuest 2, and upcoming superspy MMO The Agency. Now you can hear your guild leader freak out on raids!





Space Siege

In space, no one can hear you shrug

words Mike Griffin

"...your Humanity level is more crucial when it comes to weapons and skill trees."



I've just returned from a long tour of duty aboard the ICS Armstrong in Gas Powered Games' Space Siege. Among other valuable life lessons from the future, I learned that deep space travel is more enjoyable in the company of others, as long as they aren't aggressive alien invaders hell-bent on humanity's eradication. I also learned that when you hype features like critical story-altering decisions in your action RPG, you'd better deliver on the repercussions.

Space Siege includes multiple endings based on main character Seth Walker's Humanity level (a portion is lost each time you add a cybernetic implant) and critical decisions near the game's final stages. Diligent reviewer person that I am, I finished Space Siege every possible way, eager to experience many angles of the campaign. Reality check: The different endings were lame, sometimes separated by no more than a couple of paragraphs, doing little to repair the game's flat campaign plotline and spotty dialogue delivery (especially Gina's, whose inflections are all over the place).

In the end, your Humanity level is more crucial when it comes to weapons and skill trees, as these often carry a pre-req of specific cyber implants and/or Humanity. So if you really want that huge mini-gun, you'll have to sacrifice some Humanity to install a robot arm. Despite this twist, the character building and skill-tree climb in Space Siege is fairly narrow. I made Seth into a melee fiend (embrace the dodge button), a master of robot drones, a twin plasma pistol master, and a fully robotic tank, yet nothing could top the benefits of remaining at least 90 percent human: At the peak of the skill tree there's a 30-second duration buff—with a generously quick refresh—that halves all incoming damage to you and your robot companion. You'll steamroll entire rooms of evil Kerak and robots, saving truckloads of health kits. The toughest bosses can be dispatched with a few stacks of grenades and this wondrous damage mitigation.

The campaign is diminished by excessive travel (too many elevators!) and some very bland sections of the ship—both structurally and visually. But that's just one campaign on the disc. Space Siege

Kerak and crazed cyborgs run amok on the Armstrong.

redeems itself with a thoughtful multiplayer co-op campaign featuring all new levels and missions. I didn't touch the multiplayer campaign until all my single-player hijinks were complete, and I was shocked and impressed: The missions are cooler (you actually get a sense that you're saving the ship) and the level design is stronger, more varied. You and a few buddies can build characters (everyone starts with dozens of skill points to spend) and immediately take on these missions in three selectable difficulties, predictably more lucrative at the high end.

I probably put about 30 hours into Space Siege and I'm still interested in playing the multiplayer game online when it launches. That tells you something. On the other hand, I wasn't impressed by the single-player campaign, a big part of the game, and I acknowledge that the skill trees are pretty sparse. On the technical side, SS is merely competent: Particle effects and physics are good, but the ship's repetitive environments and assets are mostly forgettable, and models aren't particularly detailed. Weapons and explosions sound thick and powerful, while enemy grunts and threats (akin to the Strogg's mumblings in Quake 4) usually miss the mark. There was more passion and variety in the presentation of GPG's previous action RPG, Dungeon Siege 2. And I think I'd rather see Dungeon Siege 3 than Space Siege 2.

parting shot 

You know you're jonesing for it. Diablo III gave you the fever for the flavor. You're dying for a new point-and-click-'em-up. Space Siege will not fully sate your hunger, but it may be a satisfying multiplayer snack to tide you over.

September 2008

Top 10 Selling PC Games June 2008

01	Spore Creature Creator	EA
02	The Sims 2: IKEA Home Stuff	EA
03	The Sims 2: Double Deluxe	EA
04	World Of Warcraft Battle Chest	Blizzard
05	Age Of Conan	Eidos
06	World Of Warcraft	Blizzard
07	The Sims 2: Freetime	EA
08	The Sims 2: Kitchen	EA
09	Call Of Duty 4	Activision
10	Diablo Battle Chest	Blizzard



Spore Creature Creator



Age of Conan

PC POWER & COOLING

PART OF THE OCZ TECHNOLOGY GROUP

PC Power answers what gamers want to know most when they choose a Power Supply

Over the last 22 years, PC Power & Cooling has produced many innovative computer products including: the first CPU cooler, the first NVIDIA® SLI™ certified supply, and the first 1000W computer power supply. In May 2007, PC Power & Cooling was brought into the OCZ Technology Group, forming a partnership that places the combined organization at the forefront of the high-performance computing industry.



PC Power's, Doug Dodson, head of all PSUs (both OCZ and PC Power) takes some time away from the lab to answer some questions about one of the most important components in your case...the PSU.

There are more and more PSU models available on the market, more and more powerful. How much is enough?

Since today's power supplies are more efficient and save the most energy when the load is 50% of the power supply's rated capacity, a computer system that typically draws 400 watts of power should be equipped with a reasonable amount of headroom, a 700-800 Watt power supply for example. Most important to understand is that a power supply does not deliver any more power than is needed by the system. It is a myth that a high capacity power supply uses more power – the wattage rating is simply the total power available to the system the PSU is installed in.

Should I pay attention to 80+ certifications when buying a PSU?

While some certification programs can simply act as gimmicks, we stand behind the 80+ program as we feel that efficiency in computer power supplies is a very important. As much of the world "goes green," power supplies play an essential role in this trend towards efficient power usage. While we have been pushing the efficiency trend for many years now, having an officially recognized certification validated by a third party has done a lot to raise awareness and help hold the industry accountable.

How important are SLI or CrossFire certifications?

Both NVIDIA SLI and AMD/ATI Crossfire certifications are indeed legitimate technical programs that focus on a PSU's capability to support various power-hungry GPUs. However, often these certifications are used to confuse the end-user by exaggerating a particular PSU's capability. For instance, a 550W PSU that claims "SLI Support" is certainly not the same thing as being officially NVIDIA SLI certified. And even when a particular PSU features the official SLI certification logo on an e-tailer's product page or on the product's packaging, that only tells you that it can reliably power a single, entry-level SLI enabled graphics card. End-users should check NVIDIA's SLIzone website (www.slizone.com).

アフロサムライ

AFRO

SAMURAI
Resurrection

words Dave Haverson

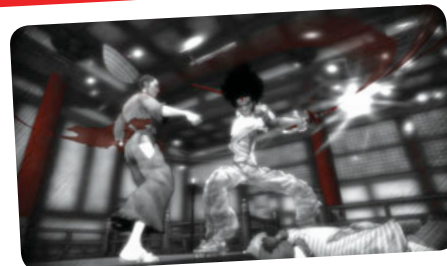
There can only be One

Coming out of Anime Expo it would appear that the anime biz is finally getting its ducks back in a row. Well, the ones that made it to shore at least. We saw the locomotive heading for ADV a while ago, but Geneon? We'll be scratching our heads over that one for a while. It was safe to assume that FUNimation would come to our rescue but who knew they'd be driving a stretch Hook & Ladder. They had me at *Black Lagoon* and *Sgt. Frog* (yes, my vigil continues), but *Afro Samurai: Resurrection* timed with the anime videogame event of the century? What's next? A next-generation 2D *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* sequel with an animated series from Gainax written by Joss Whedon starring Brad Pitt?

It's not as easy as people think constantly feeding two insatiable passions (although game consoles that double as DVD players have certainly streamlined the process). I love my games but my anime side has a tractor beam of its own that's usually tethered to one of the numerous PVC, plastic, or polystone half-naked 8- to 24-inch-tall anime girls that occupy the gross square footage of my writing quarters (I know, scary). The perfect cure for what ails me? *Afro Samurai*. Anyone who caught the first 5 episodes, whether by Spike, or FUNimation—the latter of which comes in the kind of box you never put away, flush with 5 uninterrupted uncut episodes, bonus materials and assorted goodies—knew what they had just witnessed was way too good to end anytime soon. It's not every day you get to see the coolest Samurai on the planet (played by the coolest actor on the planet) accompanied by the coolest imaginary friend on the planet (also played by the coolest actor on the planet) slice up a few dozen fighting masters like Thanksgiving ham, as the appetizer. Now that The One is a zero, and Number Two is The One, we can really get down to business. Now close your eyes, and think real hard... What actress could possibly be considered the female counterpart of the man that received a sign from the man himself and chilled out Honey-Bunny all in one day? Think anime... Tarantino... Too easy right? How crazy is that? Uma Thurman (no, psyche). Lucy Liu plays Sio, a sadistic and obviously seductive mastermind plotting to destroy Afro. Also new to the chopping block, Mark Hamill plays Bin, Sio's servant and protector. Finally, I knew he'd give in to the dark side! Mark Hamill playing a bad guy to Sam Jackson's "good" guy to a RZA classical/rap fusion... If that's not the definition of what makes East/West anime the most exciting pairing since chocolate and peanut butter I don't know what is.



Afro Samurai Xbox 360 / PS3, Q1 2009



The latest screens from Namco Bandai's upcoming greatest game ever, Afro Samurai



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Ghost Hunt

They ain't afraid of no ghosts

words Bill Gray

I was prepared to dislike *Ghost Hunt*, I'll admit it. Japanese horror has never been my cup of tea—the brutality of *Ju-On* and the dreadfully disturbing images of *Uzumaki* left stains on my subconscious that I'm not sure I'll ever be able to scrub away. But *Ghost Hunt* is less *Ringu* and more *Scooby-Doo*, minus the wholesome morals and Casey Kasem's voice, natch. Plus, it's genuinely creepy and has characters that—gasp!—actually develop and change.

The hunt begins with teenage girl Mai Taniyama, a student with a talent for scaring the skirts off her friends with her ghost stories. One of their late-night story sessions is rudely interrupted by Kazuya Shibuya, a preternaturally cool upperclassman who also owns the Shibuya Psychic Research Center, or SPR for short. Kazuya has been called by the school's principal to investigate a “haunted” building on the grounds. He enlists Mai after she accidentally wrecks some of his expensive equipment and injures his original assistant. So now Mai can star in her very own ghost story.

The school that hired Kazuya, taking no chances, also brings in a shrewish shrine maiden, a Buddhist monk on sabbatical, an Australian exorcist, and a famous TV psychic to de-ghost the building. I kept waiting for Egon or Venkman to show up, but alas—the principal's budget must have been tapped out.

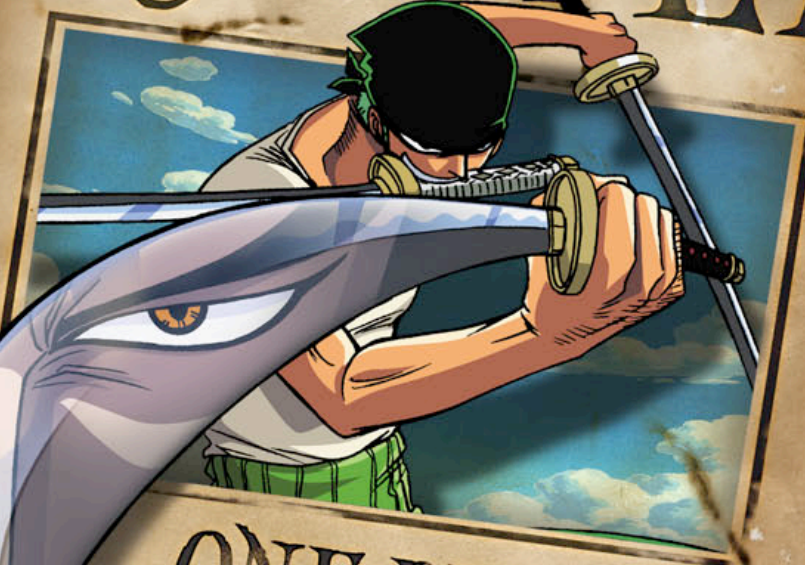
The troupe provides some gentle comic relief as they try (unsuccessfully) to cast out the poltergeist haunting the building. By episode three, it's off to the next adventure as this little story arc sorts itself out, the spirit departs, and Mai finds herself employed full-time by SPR and its self-absorbed president.

I genuinely enjoyed *Ghost Hunt*. In typical anime fashion, we get only hints as to the overarching dramatic action of the series, but the episodic “cases” that SPR investigates are intriguingly, delightfully creepy. *Ghost Hunt* conforms to the theory that “less is more.” Instead of vicious killings or shocking special effects, the paranormal here takes the form of chairs moving by themselves or the entire contents of a room being turned upside down. Though *GH* falls short of the polish and intensity of *Hell Girl*, it compensates with strong characters and a well-paced, well-written plot. I could see how a show like this would be successful as a prime-time network drama—it's buckets of ectoplasm better than similar (cough) *Ghost Whisperer* (cough) shows on TV now.

“Plus, it's genuinely creepy and has characters that—gasp!—actually develop and change.”



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GURREN LAGANN

Buxom babes and really big heads



words Dave Halverson

Bandai Entertainment seemed to roll through the US anime scene's most turbulent year since the first Otaku cursed-out a dub like it was a speed bump. Now you know why they change out Power Rangers faster than Menudo. All that Mega-zord money adds up. It also helps when your US subsidiary consists of a single marketing guy, who says there's a PR guy although nobody has actually ever seen or heard from him. Come to think of it, Bandai started playing it conservative around 2000. They must have caught one of those 20/20 doomsday reports about the big 2000/2001 tick of the tock. In any case their latest contribution to keeping us huddled around the giant flat screens we'll be paying interest on long after they become obsolete is none other than the dynamite Gainax show *Gurren Lagann* (!), one of the top series headed for the homeless shelter when ADV went kablooe.

From the outside *Gurren Lagann* may look like just another boy-meets-mecha retread, but this one is from that "other" side of Gainax. Imagine a cluster of cubicles stuffed with random stacks of line art from the last decade of shows, 3 to 4 empty tea bottles, an ash tray in desperate need of empty, a computer monitor lined with sticky notes and somewhere in the center an extremely gifted animator who appears

to need an immediate nap. That would be the *Neon Genesis Evangelion/Nadia: The Secret of Blue Water* side. Across the way things appear in similar disarray, only the walls are covered with an overlapping patchwork of everything from a Daisy Duke poster to a Pug calendar from 1995, there's a Famicom on the floor attached to a 13-inch TV on a chair, and the extremely gifted animators all have tattoos, brightly colored hair and are wearing sunglasses left over from the last Flock of Seagulls concert. That would be the *FLCL*, *Gurren Lagann* side. That seemed like an awful long way to go for simple analogy didn't it?

The series begins in man's darkest and most claustrophobic hour. Mother Earth has finally had enough of our crap, and made life on the surface so lethal that what's left of humanity is forced to live in small underground villages. After a few generations of living like wolverines, it is widely accepted that exposure to the surface equals instant death, but Kamina (rebel, badass...nut job) vehemently disagrees. Simon on the other hand is a text book wimp, although he also happens to be a master driller, and in a world where the only boundaries are dirt, drilling equals job security. Unfortunately it also means going through life as dirty little hole digger. Not exactly big with the ladies. Seems like it's about time for the series' hook to drop in wouldn't you

say? Ah, here it is now. All those rumblings they thought were earthquakes? Sorry Hans, wrong answer. It was robots! But not just any robots: These mechs are just big heads piloted by strange fur covered vermin called Beastmen, and one just broke through. If only Simon had one of those heads, and Kamina could somehow get a body so they could combine, that would be cool. Especially if they were joined by a girl with a 15 out of 10 body wearing a bikini top about 3 sizes too small so that her large pert bouncing breasts were like a character unto themselves. Now that would be something.

"Mother Earth has finally had enough of our crap, and made life on the surface so lethal that what's left of humanity is forced to live in small underground villages."

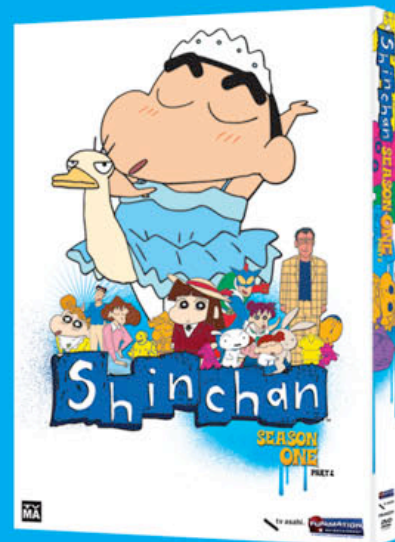


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(08)



manga review

Released by: Dark Horse | Story: Okuse Saki | Art: Meguro Sankichi |
Volume: 1 | Length: 216 pages | Available: Now

Ghost Talker's Daydream

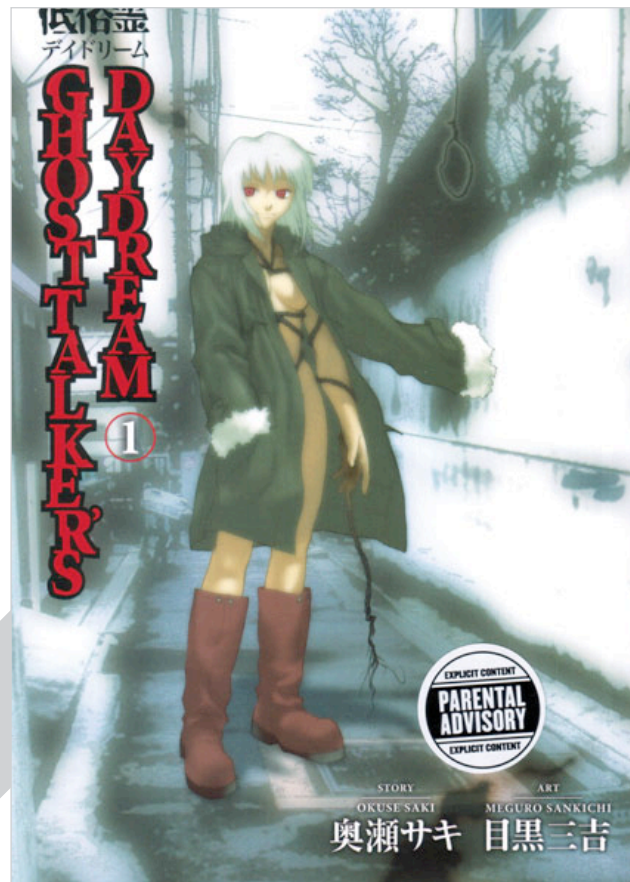
All tied up and no place to go

can just imagine Dark Horse's pitch for *Ghost Talker's Daydream*: "Okay, you've got this girl, right? And she's a dominatrix at a local S&M club, even though she's only a teenager. But wait! She also has the ability to speak for the dead—let's call it 'ghost talking.' Yeah, and let's make her an albino! And hairless! And a virgin! It's gold, I tell you! Gold!" Um, slow down there, Sparky—bizarre doesn't necessarily equal great.

First, some background. The dominatrix, Saiki Misaki, is just an honest girl trying to make a living. Being a "mistress" at the S&M club pays the bills, and she happens to be good at it, so why not? And if she can make a little extra scratch cleaning up psychic messes for the Japanese government, great! This first volume tracks two of Saiki's cases. In the first, she explores a building that seems to draw suicides to it, and in the second, she unravels the mystery of a teddy bear the Yakuza seem desperate to find.

The stories hit all the right notes—a perfect blend of the paranormal and detective noir with that touch of weird that I expect in manga. But I found myself wanting a little more from the characters themselves. Tantalizing hints of Saiki's past are dropped here and there, but more backstory or foreshadowing would have really hooked me into the book itself. Definitely a promising pickup, though.

Bill Gray



Released by: Dark Horse | Author: Masamune Shirow |
Volume: 1 | Length: 192 pages | Available: Now

manga review

Appleseed Book 2: Prometheus Unbound

Another bite of the apple

It's good to be back in the hands of a master again—and with Masamune Shirow, you're dealing with a true legend. With *Appleseed Book 2: Prometheus Unbound*, he picks up the threads scattered at the end of *Appleseed*, returning to the metropolis of Olympus, where humans, cyborgs, and "bioroids" (genetically engineered humans) live in prosperous, uneasy tension.

The volume opens with Duenan, a no-nonsense SWAT officer, trying to reintegrate with the police force, while her partner, the jovial cyborg Briareos, recovers from his injuries. Duenan surprisingly gets recruited to join a new police unit, the ESWAT team, which reports directly to the chief of staff and no one else. Cue conspiracy music.

Meanwhile, the ruling council of Olympus debates an unusual proposal—to turn Olympus over to the seemingly perfect bioroids, who would presumably do a better job governing humanity than humanity itself. It all comes to a head during a demonstration of the council's "gun platforms," robotic tanks the size of buildings, bristling with heavy weaponry. The tanks turn on their controllers, leaving Duenan and Briareos, the only members of the ESWAT team with all the answers, to stop them.

Every aspect of this book, from its incredibly tight, super-clean artwork to its dense, twisting story line, demonstrates Shirow's absolute command of the cyberpunk genre and foreshadows the work he was to do on *Ghost in the Shell* and *Dominion*. A minor quibble: It's too bad Dark Horse didn't release it as a full-size graphic novel, as Shirow's intricate pencil work would have been easier to appreciate with larger pages. Bill Gray



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"The infernal machine in question here is a bamboo baby carriage that carries a stone-faced infant.."



Shogun Assassin 5: Cold Road to Hell

Blood and flurry

Directed by: Kenji Misumi | **Starring:** Minoru Oki, Tomisaburo Wakayama | **Released by:** Animeigo | **Rated:** N/A

The last and loopyest entry in a series of popular chambara films based on the manga *Lone Wolf and Cub*, *Shogun Assassin 5* proves that a well-worn idea will never lose its steam as long as there's plentiful violence to back it up, and outlandish gadgetry, especially ones that are tricked out for maximum carnage, are always crowd-pleasers. The infernal machine in question here is a bamboo baby carriage that carries a stone-faced infant, Daigoro (Akihiro Tomikawa), who is kept safe by the cart's hidden arsenal of weapons, including a battery of rifles and blades in the handles. The man responsible for this pram of death is Daigoro's father, Ogami Itto (producer Tomisaburo Wakayama), former executioner for the Togukawa Shogunate and now a hunted man after false accusations by Retsudo (Minoru Oki), the villainous head of the Yagyu clan. Over the course of the previous six (or five – more on that later) films, father and son fulfill paid assassin gigs while avoiding Retsudo's children and henchmen. Their clashes invariably led to the series' visual (and visceral) trademark: a series of apocalyptic sword battles which culminate in mass slaughter and literal geysers of blood.

Cold Road to Hell (also known as *Lone Wolf and Cub: White Heaven in Hell*) finds Retsudo still

ringing the murder bell for Ogami, but with only one offspring left to carry out the job, daughter Kaori (Junko Hitomi). Though no slouch in the homicide department (her signature move is a gymnastic bit in which a dagger is driven through the top of her victim's skull), she's quickly dispatched by Ogami, and Retsudo is forced to call in forgotten illegitimate son Hyoei (Isao Kimura), who has been sulking on a shadowy mountainside while learning black magic tricks from a primitive tribe. After a lengthy "you're not the boss of me" argument between the pair, Hyoei sets out after Ogami with a trio of killers in tow. Said swordsmen possess all manner of supernatural powers, from levitation to an aptitude for burrowing through solid ground like death-dealing gophers. As with all *Shogun Assassin* titles, the picture wraps with a prolonged and gore-soaked battle between Ogami and an army of killers.

Despite the outlandish premise, *Cold Road to Hell* isn't the wildest nor the best of the *Shogun Assassin* series – the violence pales beside the orgy of death in film #2, *Baby Cart in the River Styx*, and Ogami himself is almost a guest star in the picture, with most of the drama handled by Retsudo and his nutcase brood. But again, the sheer chutzpah of storyline and the wall-to-wall bloodshed should make this preferable viewing for action fans than 75% of what



passes for the genre. Animeigo's widescreen DVD is dubbed, and takes the curious tack of reinventing the series to reflect the hatchet job inflicted by Roger Corman's New World Pictures on the first two films when they came to our shores. Crudely stitched together and redubbed with excruciating dialogue (by Sandra Bernhard, among others), the resulting film, called *Shogun Assassin*, was nevertheless a favorite with grindhouse audiences, so Animeigo has simply picked up where that movie left off and reduced the six-film series to a quintet. The original Japanese language version is also available for purists; a newly-minted trailer rounds out the extras.

Paul Gaita

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The screenshot displays the play.online website layout. At the top, the 'play.online' logo is accompanied by the tagline 'the official website of play magazine'. To the right, a 'play.forums' link with the slogan 'Don't just play... connect.' is visible. A prominent 'geek' banner advertises a subscription offer: 'Subscribe Today! Feed your need with one year of geek for only \$19.95, or two years for just \$34.95.' Below this, a 'shopdigital' section promotes digital versions of play, Rocket, Girls of Gaming, and Girls of Anime. The main navigation bar includes 'playdigital', 'playgames', 'playanime', and 'playmedia'. The 'playgames' section features a review of 'Burnout Paradise' and a 'Console Digital Downloads in 2007' feature. The 'playanime' section includes a review of 'We Shadows Volume 1' and 'Burnt Angel Infinity'. The 'playmedia' section features a 'Star Trek Trailer Hits Web' news item. On the left, a 'playnews' sidebar offers a weekly e-mail newsletter. A 'girls of gaming' sidebar promotes 'girls of anime' and 'girls of gaming 5'. A 'playpolls' sidebar asks 'What's the best part of the current gen consoles?' with options like 'Online gaming', 'Digital downloads for games', 'High definition', 'Unique controls (Wii mote, Sixaxis)', and 'No more memory cards to manage'. The bottom of the page features a 'play' magazine cover and a 'girls of anime' section.

The Shop



Hercules DJ Console RMX

Hercules suggests in big bold lettering on the DJ Console RMX box that this multi-function mixing console is "Professional" grade, and it's no exaggeration. While the backlit DJ Console RMX is just as adept at handling live mixing in your home studio (it even doubles as a competent Midi controller), this weighty, well-built device has inputs, outputs and features well-spec'd for live performance. The RMX can mix digital and analog sources (like MP3s and vinyl decks) and beat match, equalize, pitch fade, scratch and apply up to six custom effects. It supports ASIO VST plug-ins, meaning hundreds of effect options. Browsing the included VirtualDJ 5 software is a breeze; you can actually use the jog wheels to select files in the menu. The DJ Console RMX is USB powered, making it a great mobile companion (even includes a carrying case) for PC or Mac notebooks at live DJ shows.

WolfKing Trooper MVP Edition

Usually WolfKing is a behind Razer, Microsoft and Logitech's gaming-grade mice, and the lower price tag of many WolfKing products explains it, but this low cost Trooper MVP is a rather fine mouse at any price (it's about 50 bucks in stores).

The comfortable right-handed MVP boasts a superior 2400 DPI Avago laser engine with three sensitivity modes, 6.4 megapixel-per-second processing, and feet rated for 250 kilometers.

Most games will allow you to assign actions to the MVP Trooper's two side buttons—a handy place for grenades or emergency teleports. Like the inferior non-MVP edition of the Trooper, there's a rapid fire toggle that enables 2, 3, or 4 shots per click, and once again we haven't found a good reason to use the feature.

The MVP Trooper was tested in Team Fortress 2, across the Space Siege campaign, and through the gentle clicks of Strong Bad's Cool Game for Attractive People. Verdict: It's a fast and reliable wired mouse option in the \$50-\$60 range.



Carrera Go Mario Kart DS

Got an extra 70.00 burning a hole in your pocket? Yeah? You must ride a Vespa. Carrera's 1:43 scale Go Mario Kart DS is calling... Hey, it's me, Wario! Im-a-gonna ween! Google it now.-



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BACK OF THE BOOK

09_08 GREG ORLANDO
SENIOR EDITOR

Pepsi, the choice of the next generation

“With the ability to expand the breadth and scope of ads in games over the course of a title’s life, it’s necessary to push this new big lie.”

Supersalesmen sell me tonic. SuperTone-O, for relief.” —John Updike

Game fans are willing to put up with a lot in pursuit of their hobby: Delays, Drake of the 99 Dragons, mouth-breathers excited by the prospect of calling people “fags” online until the mute function is activated, bugs, compromised saves, dropped connections, red rings of death, console shortages, midnight game launches, endless sequels, whiz-bang nonsense in the vein of Velocity Girl, Uwe Boll and, lest anyone forget, Uwe Boll films.

Game companies have always offered up a casual indifference. Quality is sometimes an afterthought; from E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial to Lair, from Superman 64 to Alone in the Dark, developers and publishers have shown they’re willing to pass off dreck masquerading as a high-profile release. As console games moved online, the dreck became patchable, and it became acceptable to release something that was broken and then fix it after the fact.

Little by little the indifference grew. Soon, people were paying extra to unlock content that wasn’t produced by game makers after a title’s release, but rather materials included on the original disk. The juice may have been worth the squeeze, but to get a full glass, the game companies did a squeeze of their own. Promises of backward compatibility for the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 were, at first, vigorously made and then either halfheartedly phased out or dropped altogether.

It may well be that now indifference has morphed into outright disdain. The escapist medium known as videogames has become a slave to advertising. More and more, publishers are selling space in their games, bombarding players with pitches for Burger King, Axe deodorant, Dodge, Bodog Poker, Pepsi...you name it, game companies are willing to sell it.

It was vulgar when Electronic Arts dropped its collective pants to allow gratuitous and lengthy (to say nothing of fawning) camera pans of a shiny Dodge car in Fight Night Round 3 before players were graciously allowed to play the

videogame they’d shelled out \$60 for. And it’s no less vulgar—but creatively so—that Mercenaries 2 will feature a mechanic where players will be rewarded for seeking out and then destroying in-game advertisements.

Do not misconstrue: While depressing, this is hardly surprising, and it’s certainly not a new phenomenon. Game fans have been subjected to ads since, what, Kool-Aid Man rattled his delicious sugary ice cubes on the Atari 2600 and Mattel Intellivision? Since Adventureland for the PC way back in 1978?

Static advertising was bad enough. Now, however, broadband distribution has brought shifting, “dynamic” ads to the fore. Game companies are able to alter the content and placement of their ads throughout the course of a game’s life. And with this, game companies and their advertising company lackeys have begun to push an even bigger lie than the big lie that somehow suggested players would benefit from in-game advertising.

I’m not talking about advertiser-sponsored “free” games, mind you. With those, players know what they’re getting. Instead, I confine my bucketfuls of bile to regular releases, the kind people pay \$40, \$50 or \$60 for.

With the ability to expand the breadth and scope of ads in games over the course of a title’s life, it’s necessary to push this new big lie. Web site Edge Online (edge-online.com) recently cited statistics generated by a media research company on behalf of the people who place ads in games. The research found “82 percent of consumers felt games were just as enjoyable with ads as without, while 60 percent said that ads caught their attention, made games more realistic and didn’t interrupt the experience.” They also discovered, not surprisingly, that game players also enjoy the refreshing pause of Coca-Cola, that Marlboro provides the smoothest smokes, and that the Canyonero is the apex of clown-skilled automotive luxury.

The Edge article goes further to illustrate the advertisers’ unmitigated ballsiness and disdain for their audience. “There have been other surveys as well that have specifically found that the majority of gamers actually like to see

the ads there as well,” the co-founder of one advertising company said. “If you’re playing an immersive game and you’re in an environment where you would expect to see real advertising...then having ads there, providing they’re contextual and they’re relevant to the demographic and the genre of game, adds to the experience.”

Marching arm in arm, game companies and marketing shills sold game fans the ridiculous notion that in-game advertisements would help fund development of titles, keep costs low or perhaps even reduce them. Now they’re selling the idea that game fans actually want advertisements in games. Who put forth the crazy idea that product placements and pitches were intrusive? Why, they’re necessary! They help further realism in today’s modern videogame.

Horseshit.

I’ve railed about this before. And, as I creep toward Alzheimer’s and the warm embrace of dementia, I may likely do so again. But in-game advertising is odious and serves no function in big-budget titles.

For once, I’d like some truth in advertising with a side order of “please don’t insult my (even limited) intelligence.” I know who benefits from in-game ads, and it’s certainly not me. And you can shoot me twice and then pistol-whip the corpse when a sales pitch heightens reality.

Game fans put up with a lot. But they shouldn’t have to put up with being patronized while simultaneously having to bend over when the \$60 game they purchased wants to sell them something. Or, you know, multiple somethings.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock.
REVELATIONS 3:20

HELLSING

The Bird of the Hermes is my name,
eating my wings to make me tame.

IV

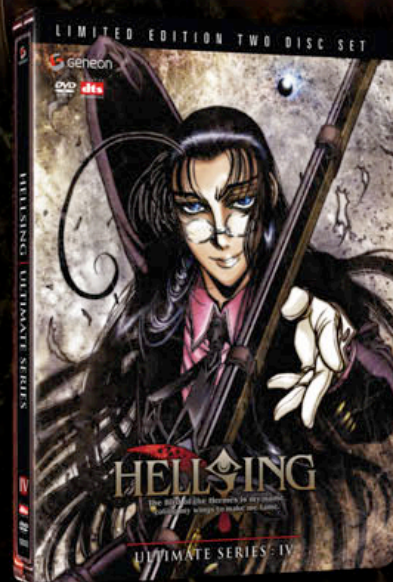
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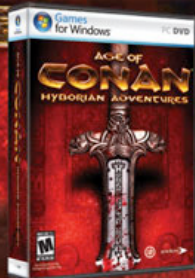
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Games for Windows

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